Navigating emotionally demanding work: a narrative study of HR practitioners' experiences

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Navigating emotionally demanding work: a narrative study of HR practitioners' experiences

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I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

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Abstract

That the human resources (HR) role is beset with tensions and ambiguities is well established, but little is known about how HR practitioners are affected emotionally by their work. This thesis addresses this lack of knowledge by exploring how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives. It shows that HR practitioners are emotional human beings who struggle with the tensions of working in a professionalised managerialist culture which requires them to give the appearance of acting in unemotional ways, while experiencing deep emotions around their work.

The study is located in a subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological position and is informed both theoretically and methodologically by a narrative perspective/paradigm. This contrasts with research into emotions in organisations that is dominated by an objectivist and functionalist perspective of rationalisation and control. This recognises that the personal experience of emotion cannot be detached from the social world, nor studied as such. Data gathering involved participant-led photo-elicitation methods in in-depth unstructured interviews. Narrative interpretation required development and refining of an approach that uses mimesis and diegesis that facilitates deep insights into the experiences of emotions in day-to-day working lives. This shows that HR practitioners deeply experience emotions in their work that they try to conceal.

The study's first contribution lies in proposing a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work. HR work is emotionally saturated because of the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced by HR practitioners while doing work that is ostensibly unemotional but deeply experienced. The second contribution of this thesis is the development/refinement of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis. Mimesis refers to the content of participants' narratives, diegesis to how participants narrated/retold their experiences. The first involves translation of the narratives; the second explores how they are performed and how the researcher experiences participants' narratives with them. These together facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of emotion and offer a lens through which to view interviews as emotion-rich narratives.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Tensions within HR work are well documented in the academic literature. Legge and Exley (1975, p.52) first highlighted ‘a basic ambiguity that pervades the function’. This ambiguity resulted from personnel managers’ overlapping responsibilities with managers, an inability to clearly pinpoint their contribution, and their uncomfortable positioning between managers and employees. These ambiguities resulted in HR practitioners being caught in ‘vicious circles’ creating tensions within the role which still persist as academic research shows 40 years later (see for example: Keegan, Brandl and Aust, 2019; Lang and Rego, 2015; Sandholtz and Burrows, 2016; Sheehan et al., 2014). It is therefore surprising that far less is known about how HR practitioners experience their work and try to deal with these tensions. How does it feel to be an HR practitioner? This issue lies at the heart of this thesis, which seeks to understand how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives.

Work itself has long been assumed to be emotion-free, although academics have argued for the last 30 years that this is a misapprehension (Albrow, 1992; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2003, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Lindebaum, Geddes and Jordan, 2018; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). Rather than the rational ideals that Weber (1968) argued organisations needed to enact to be successful, they are positioned as sites of ‘workaday frustrations and passions’ and ‘emotional arenas’ (Fineman, 2000, p.1). Yet despite continued academic interest in the emotional aspects of organisations, much emotion research adopts a functionalist perspective of control (Bolton, 2005; Lindebaum, 2017). For example, ‘emotional labourers’ are required to display emotions such as smile when dealing with customers and show empathy when handling complaints; their emotions are commodified by organisations in exchange for a wage (Hochschild, 1983). Goleman’s (1998) construct of emotional intelligence reinforces the requirement for workers to recognise and manage their emotions; this managerialist perspective understands that ‘undesirable’ emotions should not be shown in the workplace (Fineman, 2008). Positive organisational psychology requires negative emotions to be reframed as positive in order to drive organisational and individual performance (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012; Fredrickson, 2003). Such reframing may suppress lived emotional experience and polarize emotions into those which are perceived as

good (wanted) or bad (unwanted). Despite increased recognition of the existence of emotions in organisations, reason still plays a role in controlling them (González, 2017) in the literature and in practice.

Within this context of emotions and emotional control there has been little interest in researching HR practitioners as they are in 'backstage' rather than 'front-facing' roles (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014). HR work does not tend to be associated with the requirement to handle intense emotions in occupations such as nursing (Bolton, 2000), healthcare (Crego, Martínez-Iñigo and Tschan, 2013), Samaritan workers (McMurray and Ward, 2014) or counsellors (Mann, 2004). However, HR practitioners tend to be the point of contact for employees facing emotional turmoil (Hiillos, 2004), whether caused by organisational practices or life outside the workplace. They are required to handle emotionally difficult people issues (Frost, 2003) involving other people's emotions. Could it be then that HR work is emotionally demanding? Little is written about how they deal with the emotions inherent in their jobs (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014) and their experiences of emotions in their working lives are under researched. Therefore this is an issue worthy of exploration from both an academic and practitioner perspective. My personal interest in the topic stems from my past experience working as an HR practitioner, which I will expand on at the end of this chapter.

First, I discuss emotions in organisations and the role of HR practitioners. Second, I outline why I have chosen HR practitioners as study participants, set out my research questions and summarise both the methodology used and the theory I have developed. In the penultimate section I outline my contributions to knowledge. I conclude by sharing my personal interest in the topic.

Emotions

The study of emotions can be organised into four general categories which span disciplines and philosophical and methodological approaches: biological, psychodynamic, cognitive and social (Fineman, 2003). This study is positioned in the final of these broad groupings. In this social perspective, emotions are evoked by interactions with others and their importance is evaluated against the relational and cultural context (Parkinson, 1996). Social and organisational expectations, professional norms and 'feeling rules' may have an external influence on emotion

(Fineman, 2005). I explore how emotions are experienced in working lives; how study participants talk about and express emotions, what influences this, and how they navigate or cope with their experiences. My interest, therefore, lies in what sits 'outside' the dominant individual and cognitive views of emotion - the dominant psychological 'inside-out' approaches which study discrete emotions as individual, isolated phenomena (Fineman, 2010). My focus is on the breadth and nuance of emotions experienced in relation to others and the surrounding world.

The rational versus the emotional organisation: a short history

Historically, organisations were considered entirely rational places. Taylor's (1911) theory of scientific management is a classic example of rationality where the systematic study of work created rules and regulations to drive efficiency (Crowther and Green, 2004). Weber's theory of rational-legal bureaucracy states that in order to be successful organisations needed to be emotion-free '… the more it is "dehumanized", the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation' (Weber, 1968, p.975). The Weberian legacy led to the privileging of rationality in organisation theory, with attention given to strategy, decision-making and problem solving (Townley, 2008). For example, Simon's (1976) theory of bounded rationality placed emotional decision-making as irrational. Emotions were viewed as disruptive to masculine rational ideals (McMurray and Ward, 2014).

A turning point was Hochschild's (1983) influential research which coined the term 'emotional labour'. Her work challenged the idea that emotions should be rationalised as emotions became an organisational commodity for commercial gain as service sector work grew (McMurray and Ward, 2014). Researchers then gave attention to how emotions were expressed, performed and controlled in the workplace, but this placed emotions and rationality in opposition rather than being 'interpenetrated'; a position academics began to argue should be embraced by organisations (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995, p.102) as 'work is saturated with emotion' (p.119). Today academic interest in the emotional organisation has not slowed. For example, the annual book series 'research on emotion in organisations' is now in its 15th volume (Ashkanasay, Zerbe and Härtel, 2019). Yet despite the celebration and continued interest, Lively and Weed (2014) suggest our private lives

are places for more depth of emotional expression than the workplace, as emotions are subject to norms of professional behaviour or occupational standards. Lindebaum (2017, p.2) argues that emotion represents 'a prominent tool of repressive social control in terms of how workers both experience and express it'. Work may be 'saturated with emotion' but emotion may not necessarily be visible or readily expressed in organisations.

Why study how HR practitioners experience emotions in their working lives?

The origins of what is now referred to as HR stem from the industrial welfare workers at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries (Watson, 1977). Therefore, being responsible for the emotional welfare of employees in organisations might appear a logical role for HR practitioners. However, since one of the earliest critiques by Legge (1978) of what evolved from 'welfare worker' into HR practitioner, academics continue to debate the role and purpose of the profession in organisations. This debate ranges from managerialist discussions about its worth via claims to add value as a strategic partner, to more critical and humanist perspectives arguing that HR's organizational alignment has resulted in the missing 'human' in HR work (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010). For example, some suggest the impact of devolving people management responsibilities to line managers has placed the handling of employee emotions back in the hands of line managers rather than people specialists (Evans, 2017; McGovern et al., 1997; Renwick, 2003). Others argue that the drive for a more strategic rather than administrative function in the 1980s and 1990s adversely affected employee interests (Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010). This snapshot of the debates, which I explore more fully in the next chapter, demonstrates that as a profession there is a generally acknowledged tension in HR work.

Regardless of these debates about the purpose of HR, the reality of HR practitioners' day-to-day working lives is that they are responsible for handling emotionally demanding and difficult situations, described as a 'precarious balancing act' (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, p.1257). For example, on the one hand they are viewed as responsible for sensitively handling people problems (Frost, 2003) but on the other they are required to be objective, impartial and therefore unemotional in employee investigations. They are expected to collaborate effectively with line managers as

business partners, even though line managers' actions may conflict with HR practitioners' personal values and what they regard as ethical. Since Watson's (1977) sociological study of the personnel occupation, little research has considered the impact and influences of performing the HR role on HR practitioners themselves, rather than on those their work and practices are directly for. Only a handful of recent empirical studies consider emotions within HR work. For example, HR practitioners' emotion handling strategies in crisis situations (Hiillos, 2004), HR managers as toxin handlers (Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014), HR managers and emotion framed through an emotional labour lens (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014; 2018), and in considering ethical dilemmas (De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris, 2012; Linehan and O'Brien, 2017; Steers, 2008). To date, with the exception of the published work from my pilot study (see appendix 1), no research specifically explores how they subjectively *experience* emotions in their working lives. In short, this issue is underexplored.

Study purpose, research questions and methodology

The study purpose is:

To better understand how HR practitioners experience the emotional aspects of their work.

The principal research question is:

How do HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives?

The secondary research questions are:

- What experiences generate emotions in HR work?
- How do HR practitioners talk about emotional experiences?
    - How do they evaluate those experiences?
- How do HR practitioners express emotions and what influences this?
- What approaches do HR practitioners take when navigating emotionally demanding work?

These questions are underpinned by a subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Using a narrative methodology and qualitative research methods, I interviewed 11 participants using participant-led photo-elicitation methods to elicit

narratives about their experiences of emotions in the workplace. Participants were asked to bring photographs to an interview, taken on their smartphones, which represented their experiences of emotions in their working lives. Based on my pilot and full study, and a review of the literature, I concluded that using photographs encourages rich, additional narratives that interview questions alone fail to engender. Images enable people to share more than they might be able to with words alone (Allen, 2015; Shortt and Warren, 2012). Most pertinent in justifying this study, using photographs in an interview can uncover emotions that might otherwise be concealed (Bagnoli, 2009; Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014). In line with a subjectivist ontology, the direction of discussion in the interviews was guided by my participants. I deliberately provided open instructions of what participants should take photographs of, asking them to 'show me how it feels to work in HR'.

Narratives are a means of communication which help us to understand, make sense of and evaluate our experiences (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011). They are 'the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.36). Important to this study, narratives are a vehicle used to communicate intense emotional experiences, through use of figurative language, and are therefore a good way to access emotions indirectly (Boudens, 2005). I considered how participants expressed their emotions when reporting on their past experiences, whether emotions were present in the interview when they narrated their experiences, and the context in which they narrated them (a research interview with a researcher who had previously been an HR practitioner).

During data interpretation I took a traditional approach to photo-elicitation, treating the photographs as visual prompts which elicited participants' views and opinions (Harper, 2002), rather than analysing them as sources of data in themselves. Using narrative thematic analysis as an initial interpretive strategy I identified five narratives across participants' accounts: 1. No-one likes us 2. I'd hate your job 3. We're different 4. Protecting ourselves and 5. Doing repair work. But I observed how, through narrating their experiences of emotion, emotions were generated in the interview as participants performed the drama of their working lives. I noticed myself being drawn into their drama; one where I was sometimes required to play a part and became an active participant in it. To understand this I developed an innovative

approach to narrative interpretation combining photo-elicitation interviews with development of a method of data interpretation using mimesis and diegesis.

In simple terms, mimesis is what is shown and diegesis is what is told (Ryan, 2004). Mimesis refers to the content of participants' narratives, where the words and photographs participants use represent the drama of their working lives in the interview through the experiences they are mimicking. In mimesis I made a representational connection to what participants said enabling me to translate their narrative into the issues surrounding their experiences of emotions in their working lives. Diegesis refers to how participants narrated/retold their experiences; their performance in the interview where, for example, they used sounds, varied their intonation and played different characters to bring their narrative to life to their audience. In these performances I reflexively experienced their narrative with them, such as through becoming engrossed in it. Using mimesis and diegesis together as an interpretive frame 'revealed' how narrative tensions are experienced by both the participants and researcher in the interview. For example, this methodological innovation illuminated not only what participants *said* about their emotions but also how they *performed* emotion in the interview. It also showed the ways in which the narrator (interviewee) encouraged their audience (researcher) to either reflexively experience their narrative with them or become a witness to it. Emotions were present in interviews about emotion, both those of participants and researcher, something which became significant as I continued my interpretation.

What is my contribution to academic knowledge and what makes this study original?

My contribution is twofold:

1. I develop a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work
2. I develop an innovative approach to narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis

Fisher and Aguinis (2017, p.441) suggest theory elaboration can be used:

> 'as a basis for developing new theoretical insights by contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations to account for and explain empirical observations'.

Theory elaboration, therefore, is a way of using empirical data to build on what is already known about phenomenon, identifying any 'shortfalls', inadequacies or

contrasting findings as a way of developing new insights. I have argued that little is known about how HR practitioners experience emotions and recent empirical research into HR work considers the emotional challenges of the job through an emotional labour theoretical lens (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014; 2018). This is what Bolton (2005, p.53) refers to as the 'emotional labour bandwagon' of emotion research and assumes a position of rationalisation and control. What remains unexplained are the everyday, concurrent and multi-layered experiences of emotions in HR practitioners' working lives; how and why they are experienced. HR work is theorised as unemotional; situated in a professionalised managerialist culture. This taken-for-granted assumption about HR work contrasted with the study findings. Through my interpretation I developed a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work. This is the first contribution of this thesis.

Contribution one: Theoretical - Development of a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work

The theory I have developed explains that HR work is emotionally saturated because of the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced from doing ostensibly unemotional work. These tensions and struggles were identified by distinguishing between the 'work itself' (a range of job-related tasks that can be listed described and taught) and how that work is experienced (an ongoing and multifaceted stream of emotional experiences). Emotions are constructed as 'emotionally dirty' as they pollute the smooth handling of strategic decisions, interfering with the work and the professional appearance HR practitioners are required to adopt. Overall, this theory uncovers the emotionally saturated nature of HR work and reveals the emotional human being responsible for undertaking the work. The HR practitioner is not unemotional like the work is supposed to be, although study participants tried to act as if they were. They are emotional human beings who are responsible for handling other emotional human beings' strong emotions and who themselves may become emotionally damaged by those emotions. Work itself evoked emotions in the recipients of HR practitioners' work that were then directed towards the HR practitioner who, in response, deeply experienced those emotions but had to conceal them from others. HR practitioners thus found much of their work to be inherently *emotional*. This finding, therefore, contrasts with the taken-for-granted theory that HR work is unemotional by reason of it being procedural, objective and strategic.

Contribution two: Methodological – Narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis

This thesis is methodologically innovative because it builds upon a rarely used approach to narrative research that involves interpreting the mimetic and diegetic elements of participants' narratives elicited from photo-interviews.

Although photo-elicitation approaches are increasingly used in management and organisation studies and there has been a limited discussion of the promise of mimetic and diegetic approaches, the two have not been previously used in combination. Furthermore, the diegetic and mimetic elements required significant development to turn brief indicators into a fully-developed method. Consequently, I argue that interviews are sites of emotion-rich narratives in which researcher as well as interviewee is an active participant in developing/enacting the narrative. This methodological approach demonstrates the value of paying attention to observing, acknowledging and interpreting the emotions expressed in interviews (both those of the participant and researcher), something that is underplayed in research. As participants performed the drama of their working lives in the interview they exposed the emotions they had to conceal in the workplace, and I was drawn into experiencing and expressing emotions with them. In mimesis I experienced emotions as they told me about their experience and in diegesis I expressed emotions as I became drawn into participants' narratives. Viewing interviews as emotion-rich narratives can provide an enhanced understanding of the topic being explored.

In summary, this study highlights the narrative tensions and personal struggles participants experienced in their working lives. These tensions arose from the requirement to enact HR work where they were responsible for handling others' strong emotions whilst situated in a professionalised managerialist culture which required them to conceal their emotions. Though they tried to distance themselves from emotions, acting as if they were unemotional was challenging, so their emotions were concealed in the workplace but revealed in private places in their organisations, at home and in the research interview. Exposing this hidden side to HR work will enable more to be learned about the implications on those doing HR work.

Why is this topic of interest to me and to others?

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) argue that research should come from interesting questions and can emerge from past experiences. Prior to commencing this study, I worked in management and HR roles for 17 years. Now, with the benefit of critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016), I realise certain influential moments influenced my decision to leave HR work and change career to become a full-time lecturer in higher education.

When starting work as a retail management graduate I was advised to 'toughen up' to become a respected manager and shake the tag of 'graduate trainee'. When I 'toughened up' to mirror the behaviour of my female boss I was given negative feedback from my peers in the management team and felt like an outsider rather than myself. Later in my career I developed more experience and progressed from more junior to senior HR posts, with more responsibility for functional areas and HR colleagues. In developing what I thought were strong working relationships with my client groups, I was shocked when told by my line manager that I was 'too emotional'. I struggled to maintain what seemed to be the expected dispassionate, robotic-like approach with the people I worked with. I recall the types of HR practices expected to be delivered in such an emotion-less fashion.

I implemented what I now deem to be hard managerialist practices, though I did not consider this at the time. I managed 'head count' plans treating human beings as resources rather than people, implemented redundancy programmes following due legal process with standardised scripts and letters to those 'at risk', and supported the administrative redundancy process to close an entire business with 26,000 employees. I categorised people into talent management grids based on subjective views of their potential, visited the families of employees who died 'in service' to discuss administrative arrangements, sat in many disciplinary and grievance hearings supporting line managers ensuring fair process was followed, and delivered bad news to my client groups that 'despite their hard work there was no pay review this year'. To say that HR work encompasses a broad range of human emotion would be an understatement.

I do not, however, wish to paint a negative picture of organisational life in a study where I intend not to be one-sided. I enjoyed many aspects of my work. My happiest

memories centre on friendships with peers and support offered in challenging times. I enjoyed helping team members flourish, designed training programmes to support personal development, provided advice to line managers on how to handle difficult situations, attended long service lunches celebrating employees' working lives, remained calm in a crisis and was told I was 'totally reliable'.

The nature of the more emotionally demanding work I and my HR peers did was also recognised. Once with flowers delivered to my home from the HR director. On a separate occasion I was congratulated by the chief executive officer for 'exiting' a senior manager with dignity. This was where the recognition turned sour. When what others thought was good, felt bad to me. I knew scripts provided by the legal department were read robotically. I did not feel the employee was treated with dignity but my line manager said I should feel proud of the recognition. I knew I had to leave this role at this point. This rationalisation of a difficult management task steeped with emotion, and others that I have described above, underpins the formulation of my primary research question – how do HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives? My recollected memories highlight the subjectivity of emotional experience.

This study is of broader interest to others as it provides insights into how HR work is experienced by those required to enact it, when this experience is often hidden (due to reasons of sensitivity or confidentiality). Exposing these experiences may be of interest to HR practitioners in understanding if they have similar/different experiences of their work, to line managers who have responsibility for devolved HR tasks (in considering how they experience those tasks), and to those on the receiving end of HR practices (employees) in order to gain new perspectives on HR work which contrast with taken-for-granted assumptions that the work is experienced as unemotional.

In summary, I have set the scene for the following chapters with an overview of the themes in the academic literature in the two core topics I will review in chapter two, HRM (human resource management) theory versus practice and emotion research. I will argue that these two bodies of literature fall short of considering how emotions are subjectively experienced by HR practitioners. Chapter three outlines and justifies the methodological approach I have taken to research others' emotions from a

narrative perspective. Chapters four and five set out my findings where I narrate the experience of others' emotions. In chapter four I present the first three narratives: 'no-one likes us', 'I'd hate your job' and we're different. These narratives illuminate participants' subjective experiences of their work; how it feels to work in HR. Chapter five encompasses the final two narratives: protecting ourselves and doing repair work. These narratives highlight how participants navigated their experiences of emotionally demanding work. In chapter six I discuss what the emotional experiences of my participants mean in the context of what is already known about the working lives of HR practitioners and discuss the two contributions of this study. My concluding chapter summarises the purpose, importance and contribution of my work to academic knowledge, the implications of my findings on HR practitioners and those of my methodological approach, and sets out what I have learned from conducting the research.

Chapter 2 - Literature review: ‘Do HR practitioners have emotions?’

The purpose of this chapter is to comprehensively review what is already known about my topic in relation to my research questions and to identify gaps in knowledge to which I can contribute (Hart, 1998). A literature review is a continuous process, revisited throughout the research project until submission of the final written work (Grix, 2010). I continued to revisit and update this chapter whilst interpreting and writing up the data. I review two broad bodies of literature: HRM theory and the role of HR practitioners, and emotion research, structuring the chapter into these two parts. In the first part, I overview the origins of HR work and subsequent development from personnel management to HRM, using a history that is positioned in the normative and managerialist literature. I then explore the debates about the HR role and the various role typologies, followed by an analysis of the critical and ethical debates surrounding HRM which date back to the influential work of Legge (1978, 1995) and Townley (1993). Critically oriented HRM scholars call for the ‘human’ to be put back into HRM, in contrast to rationally positioned strategic HRM scholars who profess that HRM can contribute to organisational economic goals. In the second part I introduce the field of emotion research, provide an outline map of the field and locate this study alongside those who consider emotions to be a social phenomenon. This positioning sits outside of many of the popularised psychological theories of emotion that are popular in HRM practice, such as emotional intelligence. I provide an overview of emotion theories, how emotions are expressed, how they can be ‘managed’, and explore why and how this is the case in an organisational context. However, I begin by situating the organisational role of the participants in this study, all of whom are HR practitioners, and outline the various debates into the purpose and value of the HR function. In this chapter I tentatively explore whether the role they hold influences their emotional experiences and/or expression, as people interested in this study have quipped ‘do HR practitioners have any emotions?’

HRM theory versus practice

Since its emergence in the late 1980s, the phenomenon of HRM continues to be plagued with controversy (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Kaufman, 2020) as scholars debate its role and impact within organisations (Beer, 1997; Caldwell and Storey, 2007; Glaister et al., 2018; Schuler, 1990; Truss et al., 2002). These debates about

HRM in academic discourse contrast with how it is perceived in practice, with HR practitioners acclaiming the importance of their work (Guerci et al., 2019; Storey, 2007). Regardless of these debates, there is less scholarly interest in the role of the HR practitioner and how they experience and do their work (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014; Pritchard, 2010; Sheehan et al., 2014). Interest wains further when considering the impact and influences of performing the role on HR practitioners' themselves, and the emotion work required in their working lives is largely unrecognised (O'Brien and Linehan, 2018). Hence HR practitioners are the focal participants in this study as more empirical evidence is called for into working lives (Grote and Guest, 2017). Before expanding on the role HR practitioners' play in organisations, I first explore the origins of the role, the development of HRM and the surrounding debates.

An introduction to the origin and debates surrounding HRM

The first personnel specialists were industrial welfare workers; employed at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries by influential liberal entrepreneurs, Rowntree and Boot, who demonstrated paternalistic concern for the workers they employed (Watson, 1977). The first meeting of the welfare workers in 1913 addressed growing concerns about the practices of powerful industrialists of the time such as the advancement of formal rational practices to drive efficiency; for example, Taylor's scientific management (Watson, 1977). Many of the first welfare workers were female (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012) and this has not changed as HRM remains today a largely feminized profession (Ulrich et al., 2013). The industrial welfare workers evolved into personnel departments which were formed in large organisations from the late 1920s, though they had little credibility (Tyson and York, 2000). It was not until the Second World War that personnel departments developed significance, when controls on labour were tight as rational management practices were implemented to aid the war effort and some of the early tensions with personnel's welfare roots heightened. During the 1960s and 1970s trade unions grew in strength and collective agreements and bargaining became seen as a male role of labour management (Legge, 2005). At the same time organisation design ideas developed in group dynamics and cultural change as a softer human side to managing people. Despite these developments, Watson's (1977) study of personnel managers revealed a continuing credibility issue of low status and firefighting in a

reactionary service department, where it was usual for personnel managers to be responsible for employee welfare. Legge's (1978) influential work, one of the earliest critiques of personnel management, argues personnel managers had little power to enact the popular ideas in textbooks about people management. She presented three ambiguities in the personnel manager role: the overlap between personnel managers' activities and those of all managers, the absence of clear measures of success resulting in reactionary work, and being seen both as management and representing employees, creating 'vicious circles'.

Though the context of this analysis from over 40 years ago has changed, debate into what is now HRM rather than personnel management is ongoing. For example, discussions about the changing status and value of HR professionals as role holders who continue to face challenges and tensions that are inherent in the role (see for example: Cappelli, 2015; Guest and King, 2004; Legge, 2001; Parkes and Davis, 2013; Pritchard, 2010; Sandholtz and Burrows, 2016; Ulrich et al., 2013). Another line of argument is that the subsequent devolvement of HR work to line managers, which has developed over the last 25 years, has enabled HR practitioners to take a more strategic role (Pritchard, 2010; Ulrich, 1997) but has exacerbated tensions with line managers (Link and Müller, 2015). Others argue that a refocusing of the role as strategic has adversely affected employee interests (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010), and in one of the harshest of analysis, that neither strategic partner nor employee champion has been achieved and that the 'H' or the human in HRM is missing entirely (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007).

I expand this introductory history of the origins of the HR profession by next exploring the transition of 'personnel management' to 'HRM'. Was this simply a rebranding and case of 'old wine in new bottles' (Armstrong, 1987, p.31), or did the change in title signify a change in role? The shift from personnel to HRM across the 1980s and 1990s was heavily influenced by academics in the United States, responding to external factors such as globalisation and a neo-liberal economy (Farnham, 2010), as the theme of achieving competitive advantage through human resources took centre stage (Guest and King, 2004). As strategic HRM became established, 'hard' versus 'soft' HRM dichotomies ('hard' emphasising the integration of HR policies with business strategy viewing employees as rational resources, and

'soft' viewing employees as 'proactive rather than passive inputs into production processes' [Legge, 2005, p.105] with a focus on collaboration and development) were replaced by a requirement for *both* employee consent and commitment. The consent and commitment requirement demonstrated the shift towards strategic HRM, in what became known as the high commitment management model. Though this model appeared to treat employees with respect and as valuable assets, critics argue that its aim was in pursuit of organisational profit (Legge, 2005, p.39). Influential American authors such as Pfeffer (1998) advocated the achievement of profit through people, emphasising best practice approaches. Beer et al. (1984), suggested by Watson (2010) as the founders of HRM, pressed for a more strategic HR function (Watson, 2010) to enable a long-term perspective to be taken to manage people as assets rather than costs (Armstrong, 2014). The prescriptive and normative styles of thinking about personnel management in the 1960s and 1970s that Legge (1978) first challenged seemed to have little changed with the influence of HRM (Legge, 2005; Watson, 2004). For example, both personnel management and HRM link HR practices with organisational goals, they place people management activities in the hands of line managers, and recognise that treating and developing employees well contributes to organisational success (Legge, 2005). However, such debates have now dissipated as both HR/HRM are commonly used terms today rather than personnel (Armstrong, 2014).

The broadly accepted underlying belief of HRM is that human resources provide competitive advantage and therefore the aim is to ensure HR policies and practices are aligned to business strategy in order to gain employee commitment (Armstrong, 2014). However, questions are still raised as to whether employees are treated as 'valuable assets' who provide competitive advantage, as Storey (2007, p.9) infers when he states 'the human resource *ought* to be nurtured as a valuable asset', suggesting this may not be the case. What role, therefore, does and can the HR practitioner play in nurturing human resources and what level of influence do they have in organisations as they are only one of many stakeholders? This tension between the profession of HRM itself and the balance of power held within organisations has been widely explored; see for example: Guest and King (2004), Guest and Woodrow (2012), Keegan et al. (2018), Lang and Rego (2015), Legge (1978, 1995) and Townley (1993). The varying influences on the tensions from these

analyses will be explored in sections that follow, that is, HR role typologies, their varying foci and the influence of business partner models, and the impact of devolving HR responsibilities to line managers on HR's relationship with employees.

HR role typologies – who is HR there for?

HR role typologies categorise what HR functions do in organisations as a means of analysing the diverse nature of HR work and different tensions, such as issues of power, level of influence, and strategic or tactical intervention in organisations (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012). One of the earliest dates back to Legge's (1978) three roles of: conformist innovator, where HR practitioners adopt organisational values and goals; deviant innovator, where norms are challenged and social values promoted through fair treatment rather than privileging profits; and problem solvers, where effectiveness is measured through spotting and solving employers' problems. Exploring the continued relevance of this model, Guest and King (2004) found conformist innovators to be the norm in contemporary businesses and little evidence of the deviant innovator or problem-solving roles. The ambiguities Legge originally highlighted had dissipated, not only because of more acceptance that line managers have clearer responsibilities for people management, but also because the question of whether HR was there for management or for employees had been resolved in favour of HR being positioned more clearly as there for management. This view is supported by those arguing that HR has lost touch with employees and sides with the organisation (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Wright and Snell, 2005). Put more strongly by some participants in a more recent empirical study 'HR is actually the last place to be located in an organization if you have a concern for "people" or a concern for a moral and authentic self' (De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris, 2012, p.104). In response, a refocusing of the profession to embrace humanistic and soft HR skills is suggested by Rynes (2004). One of the earliest authors explicitly referencing the emotional challenges in HR work, Rynes critiques the lack of humanism in hard HRM approaches, an argument that echoes the tension Legge (1978, 1995) had highlighted between the competing discourses of care or control.

These longstanding debates as to where HR practitioners are positioned in organisations are convoluted by many differing role typologies. Marchington and

Wilkinson (2012, p.143) differentiate between them using numerous factors; Legge's (1978) three roles through the ability to influence and increase power, Tyson and Fell (1986) using building site analogies of 'clerk of the works, contracts managers and architects' through level of involvement, discretion and short to long-term approaches for business decision making, and Storey's (1992) 'handmaiden, regulator, advisor and change-makers' through strategic or operational involvement. However, it was the introduction of Ulrich's (1997) typologies which began to influence a re-organisation of the HR function to add value through a strategic partner focus, playing into managerialist critiques of HR as failing to add value to business performance (Skinner, 1981). Ulrich offered five multiple HR roles of 'employee advocate, human capital developer, functional expert, strategic partner and HR leader' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). The employee advocate represents employee voice, demonstrating compassion with employees but controversially also manages their 'removal' in performance management (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012); human capital developers view employees as assets whose development should be supported; functional experts demonstrate specialist expertise in people management; strategic partners work with line managers across organisational hierarchies challenging and leading strategic thinking to achieve business objectives; and finally, as HR leaders, 'good' HR practices are role modelled in an integrated HR function. These multiple roles are critiqued as over promising what the HR practitioner can practically deliver (Caldwell, 2003) and lack clarity of what 'being strategic' actually means (Truss et al., 2002).

Ulrich's (1997) three-legged stool model of the HR function of 'strategic business partners, centres of expertise and shared services' led to a restructuring of HR departments. Strategic HR business partners work in partnership with business unit leaders supporting them to develop their strategy, centres of expertise are specialised HR functional areas (such as recruitment, reward, employee relations), and shared services are centralised transactional service teams who manage processes such as payroll and administration of employee rewards (Caldwell and Storey, 2007). Gerpott (2015) suggests business partner roles were widely adopted in organisations despite the three-legged stool model lacking sufficient theoretical underpinning. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2015) reported that Ulrich's model is more often adopted in the United Kingdom in large HR

departments of 50 or more HR staff, with 62% of HR departments of this size adopting the model. However, Hird et al. (2010) argue that implementing Ulrich's model saw limited success due to issues such as little understanding from line managers about how the model works, newly required HR skillsets being overlooked, and use as a universal approach without considering practical application. The impact of the HR business partner model on stakeholder relationships has been explored (Keegan and Francis, 2010; McCracken and Heaton, 2012), the challenges highlighted in delivering both strategic business partner and employee advocacy roles (Sheehan et al., 2014), and arguments made that the long-term use of the business partner model may reinforce the inherent tensions in HRM (Gerpott, 2015). Conversely, some studies have considered the transition to strategic HR business partner as a means of reinforcing credibility and professional identity (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Fear, 2015; Wright, 2008), though one recent study demonstrates a lack of power of HR business partners over managerial priorities (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015, p.203) argue that the HR function should continue to demonstrate how it 'adds value' by adapting to the external environment, what they call an 'outside/inside approach which connects HR to the broader business context' in order to meet external stakeholder needs. HR seems always to be disconnected by its design/role as calls are made for better integration with others both inside and outside the organisation.

It does appear, however, that the apparent growth in popularity of Ulrich's roles in practice created more criticism of HR practitioners in the academic literature. The generally acknowledged desire from HR practitioners themselves to be seen as a strategic partner aligned to the business (Caldwell, 2003; Pritchard, 2010) is countered with calls for more balance towards employee-facing work (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005), as it is argued HR lacks distance from organisational leaders (Wright and Snell, 2005) and has reduced concerns for employee welfare against an increasing preoccupation with business performance (Peccei, 2004). Even Ulrich's repositioning of 'employee champion' to 'employee advocate', where fair treatment of employees is emphasised and employees are in a more central position to organisational success, remains positioned in a unitarist framework of mutual interests aligning the HR business

partner to managerialist goals (Keegan and Francis, 2010). Despite the generally acknowledged role tension surrounding HR business partners in the literature, Roche and Teague (2012) found HR managers operating as business partners were broadly comfortable playing diverse multiple roles, situating their practice in welfare values. What appears notable from these empirical studies are that the working lives of the HR practitioner seem distinct from the debates in the academic literature about what HR is and ought to be and are therefore worthy of exploration.

Where have the emotions in HR work gone?

Based on these tensions, questions arise that are pertinent to this study of how HR practitioners experience emotions in their work. How do HR practitioners cope with the contradictions between a normative HRM focus which encourages more rationality, and other calls for more empathetic approaches towards employees? Emotions have not featured in the HRM research I have reviewed thus far, and therefore it could be argued that through its evolution to become a professional function, emotions are not required and so are unconsidered. HR work is preoccupied with a requirement to be strategic; aligned to organisational performance goals through HR policies and procedures. The emotional aspects of HR work are rarely considered, especially of those who are responsible for enacting the work.

A handful of recent empirical studies have explored the emotional challenges of the HR role. O'Brien and Linehan's (2014, 2018) study framed the work of HR managers around an emotional labour lens (which I discuss in more detail in the sub-section on emotional labour) and Hiillos' (2004) study identified the emotion-handling strategies HR practitioners use in situations the participants labelled as 'crisis'. However, both studies fail to consider the everyday experience of emotion, as they emphasise how emotions are managed or handled for instrumental reasons rather than the emotions experienced from doing HR work. Other empirical studies involving HR practitioners that have the potential to illuminate the emotional nature of HR work also overlook emotional experience. For example, Cowan's (2012) study of bullying in the workplace places the HR practitioner's perspective and their understanding of the topic as its focus, but does not consider the emotional impact of handling bullying complaints on the practitioner. Fassauer's (2020) study explores the extent to which HR practitioners practice care in the workplace. Though this study is concerned with

the workplace experiences of HR practitioners where participants' definitions of care are explored, emotions do not explicitly feature. This is despite the author's proclamation that 'care seems to be poured into the managerial role of HR professionals' which implies the role is inherently emotional (Fassauer, 2020, p.127). It seems emotions are still missing from HR work, even if HR practitioners are positioned as responsible for care, but that is not a role that is prominent in the recent HRM literature given their business partner/strategic repositioning.

Keegan and Francis (2010) suggest that as HR departments have introduced business partner models and shared service centres, and as technology advances and e-HR takes centre stage, HR practitioners may become emotionally distant from employees. That is, if they are not already emotionally distant as a result of being business partners situated in a professionalised HR function. Furthermore, Caldwell and Storey (2007) suggest the move to business partnering and consultancy-style roles that emphasise relationship building with line managers has introduced more tension within HR because of the potential conflict and confusion about whether HR business partners should report into functional heads, HR or both. Further questions about who HR business partners should side with, i.e. if they side with departmental line managers rather than employees, results in more fragmentation than integration of the HR department across organisations (Caldwell and Storey, 2007). Any responsibility that HR role might have for welfare is far removed from these concerns, and the emotional aspects of their work are also absent. As HR practitioners have become professional people managers, HR business partners or HR consultants, emotions rarely feature in their evolution in the literature.

Legge (1978) originally suggested that as line managers also manage human resources, this diminishes the influence and power of HR specialists. Since then, the dynamics of the relationships between HR practitioners and line managers have been explored in general terms (Evans, 2017; Keegan and Francis, 2010; McGovern et al., 1997; Renwick, 2003; Trullen et al., 2016; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003) and in relation to implementation of specific HR policies such as discipline (Jones and Saundry, 2012), bullying (Harrington, Rayner and Warren, 2012; Harrington, Warren and Rayner, 2015), and practices such as high performance work systems (Glover and Butler, 2012). However, less attention is paid to the impact of emotions in these interactions where findings point to the importance of strong interpersonal

relationships and high trust between line managers and HR partners. These studies into how HR specialists do their jobs in relation to others offer some insights into the importance of relationships in workplace interactions, yet emotions have not entered the discussion about HR work. HR is a people-facing function and the HR policies and practices in these cited studies involve human interaction. It follows, therefore, that these policies and practices have emotional aspects to them. For example, dealing with disciplinary or bullying cases can be highly emotionally charged (for both the affected employee/manager and the HR practitioner), yet the literature ignores this emotional aspect of HR work.

Critical and ethical debates in HRM

More critically oriented literature on HR shifts the focus away from 'what' HR is and 'how' it should operate, to ask 'why' (Bratton and Gold, 2015). Delbridge and Keenoy (2010, p.800) posit two sources of influence on what critical HRM (CHRM) is; firstly the discipline of critical management studies itself, which 'attempts to expose and reverse the work of mainstream management theory' (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p.18), secondly the internal voices who have critiqued HRM discourses during its evolution such as Legge (1978, 1995), Watson (2004, 2010) and Townley (1993, 2004). In summary, CHRM scholars suggest HRM's supposed concern for employees is false due to an active involvement in the exploitation of employees through management control mechanisms such as downsizing and the intensification of work (Gill, 2007). They further argue that the phenomenon of HRM has been preoccupied with the links between HRM and performance and has therefore diminished critical perspectives (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). This is because HRM is located in a unitarist perspective of the employment relationship, i.e. where management and employee goals are presumed to be jointly aligned to the achievement of common organisational goals of high performance (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009). The unitarist rhetoric of 'soft' HRM is used to disguise a 'hard' reality of management control (Gill, 2007). However, Gill (2007) argues there is a contradiction between these critiques. If HRM is ineffective as its implementation is only in rhetoric (i.e. powerless), how can it also manipulate and assert management control (i.e. be powerful)?

The relevance of power in HRM is further explored by Townley (1993) situating her analysis within the work of Foucault (1980) who places power as 'relational' rather than a 'commodity'. In this view, power comes into effect through practices or procedures rather than through specific institutions (Townley, 1993, p.520). The implications of Townley's (1993) analysis for HRM are in practices which organise employees, differentiating between them and classifying them into hierarchical order. She cites commonplace HR tools and practices which rank employees, such as appraisals, job evaluations, salary bandings and career ladders. This ranking both 'disciplines' and 'normalizes' individuals making rationality and measurement the norm for HR specialists in terms of both knowledge and language. HRM practices therefore 'manage' employee behaviour 'to create knowledge and power' (Townley, 1993, p.541). However, HR practitioners do not feature in this discussion, even though they are the ones required to enact the criticised practices.

A recurring theme amongst critical scholars is the missing human in HRM (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010; Legge, 1999; Steyaert and Janssens, 1999), an accusation levelled as HRM is called to be more strategic (Wright and McMahan, 2011). Yet this call for the human again does not consider the human beings required to carry out HR work. Those siding with this critique suggest discourses of the employment relationship as an economic exchange are privileged, highlighting 'the coercive nature of business strategies' (Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010, p.333). This suggests that although HRM pledges its interest in humanity, the difference between humanity and management interests cannot be reconciled as individual diversity is homogenised through management rules and standards of behaviour and performance, where '(HRM) has now come only to represent a powerful tool of normative control and a cold set of demands' (Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010, p.333). However, one of the ways suggested to counter these concerns is to acknowledge the possibility of individual differences in how employees engage with HR practices by considering the subjectivity of, support for, or resistance to various HR practices with different groups of employees; as human beings rather than as a homogenous group (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009). Cleveland, Byrne and Cavanagh (2015) suggest HR practitioners can demonstrate their humanity by addressing broader perspectives such as creating healthy workplaces, enabling employees to create meaning at work and by considering the

demands of employees' families rather than purely individual employees. HR practitioners make a brief appearance in response to the critique of their work.

However, Gill (2007) suggests the CHRM academic debates have had minimal impact on HR practitioners in practice as each has little influence over the other. The CHRM literature is largely based on concepts and theory rather than empirical studies. Given little academic research considers the experiences of HR practitioners in light of these theoretical/conceptual debates, my study uncovers their experiences of enacting HR work. I take a micro-level perspective to better understand the lived experiences of those who do the job in the midst of these debates. I surface the little heard voices of those in management roles who experience the same organisational controls as employees (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010), and who are faced with the challenges of balancing what the literature identifies as the contradictory demands of their role.

What is the impact of these debates on HR practitioners themselves and how do HR practitioners address the ethical challenges they face?

Given the historical debates, tensions and critical perspectives on HR work highlighted in this review, it may be fair to say that HR has an image problem. Despite both ongoing academic debates and practitioners continued struggle to gain legitimacy in HR business partner roles (Heizmann and Fox, 2019), an alternative definition of HR taken from the urban dictionary (2016) describes:

> 'A non-value added component of many large companies. Human resources is a worthless division in a company that often has power beyond its members' level of intelligence' (Anonymous).

HR is portrayed in a negative light and described as 'evil' in the Dilbert cartoon series (Adams, 2016). 'Catbert' is 'the evil director of Human Resources' suggesting 'evil' ideas such as dispensing with holiday days and increasing sick days so employees deliberately become sick to gain time off (Adams, 2016). Though the word 'evil' is best contained to fictional humour, the HR function is 'vulnerable to negative images' (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, p.1278). In a rare study privileging the voices of HR practitioners, Steers (2008, p.399) presents the personal narratives of HR practitioners, demonstrating how they are 'forced to cope with immoral organisational and HR practices' and the emotional stress this brings. Examples from his study include participants 'massaging' data for senior HR leaders to avoid highlighting a

credibility issue and being aware of deliberate strategies to 'exit' employees from organisations that they described as political bullying. However, the HR professional body, the CIPD, sets behavioural standards for practitioners to have 'courage to challenge' and 'role model' ethical standards in organisations. Both the CIPD's (2017) own survey and an earlier academic empirical study by Parkes and Davis (2013) found that though HR practitioners recognise themselves as 'ethical stewards', they struggle to carry out this role in practice due to competing business needs. The CIPD (2017, p.3) found that HR practitioners identify more strongly with their organisation than the profession 'when under pressure from the business'. In the light of high-profile corporate scandals such as Volkswagen emissions, these findings do not make good reading and beg the question whether identifying with their profession rather than their organisation has always been a challenge for HR practitioners?

There was early interest shown in the ethics of HRM through Watson's empirical study of personnel managers (1977) followed by Legge's work (1995, 1998). Other studies followed (such as: Bevan, 2007; Townley, 2004; Winstanley and Woodall, 2000). Forward 30 years from his original study, Watson (2007, p.223) developed his argument that HR managers are 'extremely limited' when making 'ethical interventions' in organisations. However, little is known about how contemporary HR practitioners articulate and experience ethical challenges in their daily working lives (De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris, 2012). Two recent rare empirical studies of the lived experiences of HR practitioners are positioned through a moral lens by De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris (2012) and Linehan and O'Brien (2017). De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris (2012, p.99) found HR practitioners enact their work through 'distancing, depersonalising and dissembling', thereby supporting organisational rather than workforce moral needs. For example, distancing is gained by legislation that places employee and HR practitioner apart. This can be illustrated in redundancy legislation where 'roles' are made redundant rather than the 'people' in them, thereby distancing the HR practitioner from the human impact. Depersonalisation is akin to Townley's (1993) Foucauldian analyses of HR practices, such as categorising employees and ranking performance. Dissembling is a means of grouping employees into behavioural groupings or by personality traits, such as in competency-based behavioural models. They concluded that HR practitioners were

protective of the organisation rather than acting for employees, that is 'acting *on* Others rather than *for* them' (De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris, 2012, p.104), a position at odds with the traditional welfare role. However, supporting Guest and Woodrow's (2012) view that the achievement of ethical goals is near impossible due to the managerialist focus of HR practices, Linehan and O'Brien's (2017) study offers links between emotions and ethical dilemmas in HR work. They critiqued De Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris' (2012) study for failing to account for contextual factors during in-the-moment interactions. Taking a more supportive view of the challenges of HR work, Linehan and O'Brien (2017) found the continuation of competing discourses of 'care or control' originating from Legge's work (1978, 1995). They argued that HR practitioners suppress their own emotions in order to meet organisational requirements that conflict with their own personal values. This, they argue, is very different from neutralising or 'effacing the face' of 'the Other' (Bauman, 1990). They 'depersonalised' themselves in order to manage emotionally challenging work.

Both these qualitative studies offer nuanced accounts of HR practitioners' work, and though my study does not place ethics at its centre, they provide insightful perspectives that I build upon by exploring how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their work. Some of these emotions may be described as 'toxic' where they are mishandled (Frost, 2003). The nature of HR work may involve handling emotional toxicity from unhappy or emotionally charged employees; for example, raising complaints and formal grievances, supporting long-term absence procedures, handling complex disciplinaries and delivering redundancy programmes. HR practitioners are viewed as the point of contact when people related problems arise (Metz et al., 2014). Along with others in organisations that Frost (2004) refers to as 'toxin handlers' they have the responsibility to pass on difficult or painful messages from organisational leaders, and Frost found that they attempted to implement them in a more compassionate way, minimising hurt for others. They are involved in a difficult emotional 'balancing act' (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014) due to the competing tensions within their role; on the one hand being seen as the 'go-to' person for people problems, on the other being required to be a neutral fact-finder and to collaborate effectively with line managers as business partners; line managers whose own actions may conflict with what is ethical or deemed right to do.

The emotional nature of the work involved in the HR role is unlikely to disappear whilst emotional human beings work in organisations.

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis and how does this relate to my research questions?

It can be concluded that from its origins, HRM and the work HR practitioners do has faced much controversy and continuing debate, ranging from managerialist discussions about its worth claiming to 'add value' as a strategic partner, to more critical and humanist perspectives arguing that being there for the organisation has devalued the importance of the 'human' in HR work. HR work is undeniably emotionally demanding but is rarely characterised as such in the academic literature. Understanding of the emotional nature of HR work as experienced by HR practitioners rather than those on the receiving end of their practices has not been the focus of much research to date. In line with the purpose, this study provides a better understanding of how HR practitioners experience the emotional aspects of their work. I next summarise various emotion theories and consider how they might be expressed, managed and navigated in organisations.

Emotion Research

The field of emotion research covers a broad range of disciplines, philosophical approaches and methodological applications. For the purpose of this study, where the primary research question aims to understand how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives, the focus of this review is on literature relating to emotions in organisations. In contrast to perspectives privileging rational managerialism, organizations are not emotion-free zones, and academics have been arguing that this is the case for over the last 30 years (Albrow, 1992; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2003, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Lindebaum, Geddes and Jordan, 2018; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). Furthermore, emotions in personal and working lives overlap and are not as distinct as some would argue. For example, Hochschild (1983) distinguishes between 'emotion work' in our everyday lives, where the emotions we display respond to social requirements, and 'emotional labour' in our working lives, where emotion is controlled to meet organisational requirements in exchange for a wage. This delineation of emotions in and out of work is argued by some to be absolutist (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Korczynski, 2002;

Tolich, 1993). Emotion is not entirely controlled by organisations; as social human beings we experience a diverse range of emotions in both our private and working lives (Bolton, 2005).

In the organisational emotion literature, academics point to the continuing development and extension of the field. The sociology of emotions now extends over 40 years (Stets, 2012) and for the last 20 years the topic of emotions has grown in importance (Lindgren, Packendorff and Sergi, 2014). In organisational psychology theories such as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and the positive organisational scholarship movement have a practitioner focus (Briner and Kiefer, 2009). Indeed, Elfenbein (2007, p.315) cautions researchers to be aware of the development of emotions as 'one of the most popular - and popularized - areas in organizational scholarship'. Despite being offered as an 'exciting time to be a researcher interested emotions in organisations' this is countered with the view that 'the explosion of research in this area has been a boon, but it has also been a mess' (Elfenbein, 2007, p.316). In attempting to navigate a clear path through the 'mess', I will acknowledge key and influential theories relating to workplace emotions and take a social positioning focused on the interpersonal aspects: how emotions are experienced and expressed in relation to others, through our interactions and responses with the surrounding world (Burkitt, 2014). Social perspectives on emotion place importance on cultural and social influences, feeling rules and language, and can be broadly linked with a social constructionist perspective (Fineman, 2003). By contrast, dominant psychological 'inside-out' approaches study discrete emotions as individual, isolated phenomena (Burkitt, 2014; Fineman, 2010).

My review of the emotion literature proceeds as follows. First, I summarise various theories of emotions, set the scene with a visual map of the field of emotion research, and clarify the potential differences and overlaps between definitions of emotions, feelings, moods and affect. I justify my positioning of emotions as social. Second, I discuss how emotions are expressed through language, metaphor and narrative, and consider what influences their expression in organisations. Third, I discuss how emotions can be 'managed' in an organisational context, reviewing influential theories such as emotional labour, where I justify why this study is focused on the experience of emotions rather than taking the 'emotional labour bandwagon' (Bolton, 2000, p.164). I consider both negative and positive framing of emotions, in

particular organisational control of emotions and positive organisational scholarship. In conclusion, I consider how emotionally demanding work can be navigated.

Introducing key emotion theories

> '…what we often mean when describing a person as emotional is that they experience their emotions - any emotions - intensely' (Elfenbein, 2007, p.328).

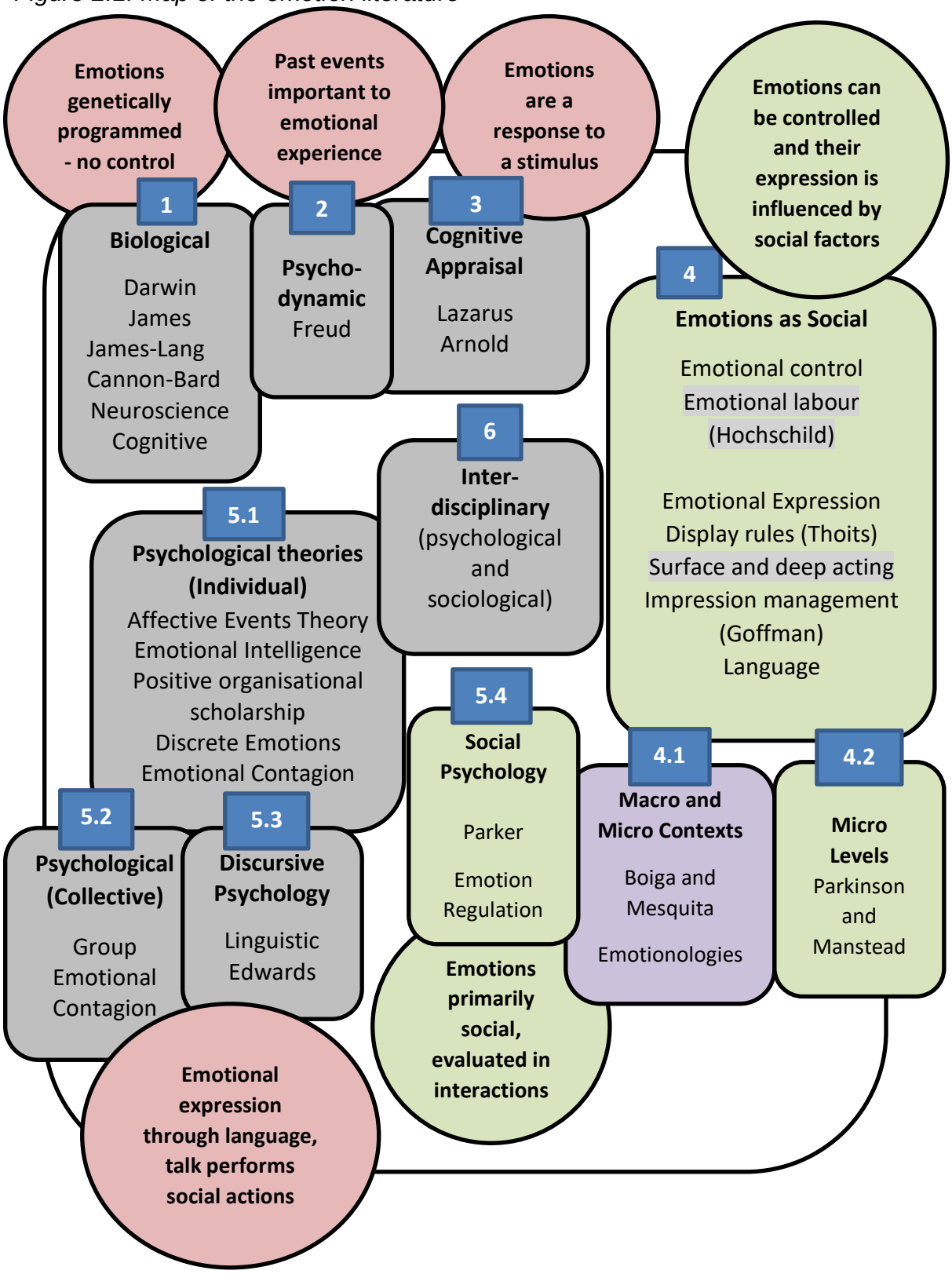
Taking this quote at face value, a question arises - how we could possibly know how people experience the intensity of emotions when we cannot experience the issues in the same way? The start point is to define what emotions are, though this in itself is not straightforward. An overview of the vast body of literature on all emotion theories is not achievable in this review, so I will set out the major debates in the following discussion.

Definitions of emotions are broad and tend to differ depending on the discipline, ranging from 'biological and neurological, behavioural, cultural, structural and situational' (Turner, 2009, p.341). Various terms are used: emotion, feelings and moods, each requiring further exploration of their respective definitions (Gooty, Gavin and Ashkanasy, 2009). One of the earliest physiological studies into emotion by James (1884) asked 'What is an emotion?' His scientific work led to the premise that emotions are experienced in response to a stimulus (Elfenbein, 2007). This initial finding was developed into the James-Lange theory, subsequently challenged by Cannon-Bard in the 1920s, who argued that our nervous system provokes emotion (King, 2001). In contrast, cognitive emotion theories suggest we appraise situations first by attempting to make sense of their meaning, subsequently followed with an emotional response. This can be described as 'head-work' preceding 'heart-work' where Fineman (2003, pp.14-15) argues that such a separation cannot be the case and rather our 'thinking and feeling interpenetrate'. Although such physiological and cognitive theories are well known, they are not the focus of my review. However, I go on to provide a broad map of the field of emotion research in order to clarify where this study is positioned in relation to others.

Mapping the field

Researchers have attempted to make sense of the field of emotion research through numerous approaches and groupings. Figure 2.1 overleaf illustrates how I have mapped the field with the location of this study highlighted green.

Figure 2.1: Map of the emotion literature



The map shows four main groupings: biological (1), psycho-dynamic (2), cognitive appraisal (3) and social (4) (Fineman, 2003). Within each I have placed some of the major theorists and theories. The circles designate their associated perspective on

emotions, for example, whether they can be controlled. Within the social study of emotion (4), the location of this study, different approaches are illustrated. For example, though much sociological research originates from emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and how emotions are controlled by organisations, other approaches consider how emotions are expressed through language or focus on the display rules that influence emotional expression (Thoits, 1985). Social approaches to emotion can be studied across macro contexts in the case of 'emotionologies' (Stearns and Stearns, 1985), across both micro and macro contexts (Boiga and Mesquita, 2012) (4.1) and at micro levels (Parkinson and Manstead, 2015) (4.2). Disciplines overlap such as across the fields of social psychology (5.4) and discursive psychology (5.3). Overall the map illustrates the breadth of the field and that understandings of what emotions are vary intensely dependent on the numerous positions taken. I will next explain these various positions and how emotions are studied.

Briefly, biological perspectives (1) hold that emotions are genetically programmed. Within this perspective, the theory of the role of the amygdala in the brain which drives emotional response was developed by cognitive psychologists. Psychodynamic perspectives (2), based on the work of Freud, attribute the importance of past events to emotional experience. Cognitive appraisal theories (3) suggest emotion is a response to how we appraise a stimulus that is triggered by a specific event (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1991). Social perspectives on emotion (4) emphasise culture, social expectations, feeling rules and language (Fineman, 2003).

An alternative grouping by ontological and epistemological positioning posits essentialist and interpretive perspectives. In the former, studies take psychological and psychodynamic approaches in order to identify and measure biologically programmed emotions which are found 'in' individuals (Fineman, 2005). Within this category (5.1) are located theories such as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzo, 1996), and positive organisational scholarship. By contrast, interpretive emotion perspectives locate emotions in public and social areas of interaction between people (Burr, 2015), in what is 'outside' individual emotion. For example, where emotions are evoked through what is socially or organisationally desired; the 'oughts', 'shoulds' and display rules (Fineman, 2005).

A third approach categorising the field is through a five-level ascending model of emotion research: ‘within person’ (such as affective events theory), ‘between persons’ (trait theories and individual difference), ‘interpersonal’ (how emotions are perceived and based on relationships), ‘group’ (such as leadership and group behaviour), and ‘organization-wide’ (Ashkanasy and Humphrey, 2011). Given the interdisciplinary nature of this categorisation this is not possible to show on the figure I have produced. From the various theoretical models outlined in their framework, Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) suggest Weiss and Cropanzo’s (1996) affective events theory (AET), a level one ‘within person’ positioning, reinvigorated psychological organisational research into emotions at work after a period of neglect. Weiss and Cropanzo (1996) argued that specific affective events in the workplace lead to an affective response resulting in behavioural outcomes, both immediate and longer term. Much of the research on AET is based on quantitative approaches to emotion measurement. A more critical perspective on AET from those positioned outside of psychology, suggests the events themselves are overlooked and not problematized as part of a broader positioning of ethical control, evidencing the ‘inside-out’ position (Fineman, 2010).

Discrete emotions

In attempting to better understand emotions in line with individual psychological emotion perspectives (5.1), researchers categorise them into discrete emotions. One of the ways discrete emotions have been identified is through facial display. For example, Ekman (1972) first studied the facial expression of emotions, where he presented six different facial expressions which were latterly recognised as six basic emotions. Since then there is general acceptance amongst those working with such theories that we experience four primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness and happiness which are part of our biological make up, with some additional emotions such as surprise, disgust and expectancy. Researchers tend to agree these vary in intensity of expression (Turner, 2009). However, those acknowledging the subjectivity of emotional experience avoid categorising emotions into universal groups. For example, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995, p.99) define emotions as ‘a subjective feeling state’, adding that ‘feeling states vary widely in terms of their intensity, duration, consistency, and valence’. If so, then the experience of emotion cannot be easily categorised into broad groups.

Are emotions different to moods and feelings?

Despite different perspectives surrounding what emotions are and whether they can be categorised, further complexity arises when introducing terms such as moods and feelings. Emotions and feelings are suggested as distinct from moods; moods linger in relation to prior events, not just the situation or current context you are in (Burkitt, 2014), whereas emotions are a response to a trigger occurrence or target object, are sustained for less time, and can result in deeper feelings (Totterdell and Niven, 2014). In distinguishing between feelings and emotions, a feeling is the subjective, internal experience, and emotion is how we show or display those feelings externally (Fineman, 2003). However, Burkitt (2014) suggests some feelings are emotions and some are not. For example, feeling nervous before an interview, feeling hungry or in pain are not emotions, but feeling lightheaded might be the emotion of being in love (or it could be coming down with an illness), adding that 'it is social meaning and context that distinguish what we feel as an emotion or some other type of experience' (Burkitt, 2014, p.8). The term 'affect' is also used in different ways by some emotion scholars to refer more generally to emotions/feelings and emotional activity (Fineman, 2003). Within psychology 'affect' describes the experience of feeling or emotion (Totterdell and Niven, 2014). However, what is termed affect theory emphasises bodily experience 'concerned with what occurs when bodies encounter each other', developed from a range of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, feminism and cultural studies (Fotaki, Kenny and Vachhani, 2017, p.4).

Where is this study located amongst these definitions?

I adopt the position that emotions signify meaning in the social world. As Bericat (2016, p.493) suggests 'emotions constitute the bodily manifestation of the importance that an event in the natural or social world has for a subject'. What is important to this study, rather than getting lost in the definitions, is that what we experience as emotions are 'signals of what is meaningful to us' (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015, p.753). Experiencing emotion 'locates the person in the world of social action' (Denzin, 2007, p.3). Emotions are considered in relation to external context and the broader situations and relationships surrounding them,

influenced by past history, the present and likely future. I explore this social positioning in detail next; important as it underpins this study.

Emotions as social

In locating this study in the body of the literature that sees emotions as social phenomena, as such their importance is evaluated in the context of our relationships with others and broader culture.

> '…emotion is not just a private meaning that indirectly surfaces in the social world but rather something that emerges directly through the medium of interaction' (Parkinson, 1996, p.680).

Within this body of literature, a social constructionist perspective emphasises what is 'outside' individual emotion. An extreme position here, only viewing emotions as social constructions, is one where emotions do not exist independently of us and are social performances (Harré, 1986). However, others are less absolutist and acknowledge biological influence (Parkinson, 2012). Such a middle-ground perspective positions emotions as partially socially constructed, concurring with Harré that emotions express 'judgements', but accepting physiological states such as increased heart rate, which evidence authentic emotional states that are 'beyond the will' (Sabini and Silver, 1998, p.226). Indeed, Bolton (2005) argues most sociologists researching emotion in organisational life analyse the social and cultural influences that construct emotions, acknowledging the existence of biological emotions with varying levels of interest and importance. Sociologists generally believe emotions are a signal function; in other words our emotions indicate how well we are handling social situations, whereas psychologists tend to prioritise physiology and cognition when studying how emotions are experienced (Lively and Weed, 2014). A sociological analysis of emotional experience is taken by Thoits (1985) to comprise four distinct elements that are interconnected: signals from the situation, physiological feeling changes, how we express the feeling, and the label we attribute to the experience. These varying approaches demonstrate that even within the discipline of sociology, researchers set out different positioning when studying emotions (Bolton, 2005).

Social psychologists tend to take a similar middle-ground position when recognising biological and neurological influences on individual emotion (5.4). Though social

psychologists believe mental and biological processes contribute, emotions are positioned as primarily social phenomena; emotions are evoked by interactions with others and their importance is evaluated against the relational and cultural context (Parkinson, 1996). Emotions are not only caused by our interactions with others, but other people's emotions can have effects where they influence others' emotions, though not necessarily mirror them (Parkinson, 1996).

Within the social emotion literature, emotions are studied at different levels. I outline three examples here: across contexts, at micro levels, and macro levels. First, viewing emotions as socially constructed through dynamic and iterative processes, Boiga and Mesquita (2012) argue that emotions are constructed across three contexts: in 'moment-to-moment' interactions, as relationships develop and are sustained over time considering past history and their likely future, and across broader cultural contexts (4.1). This contrasts with psychological approaches to emotion which simplify their meaning or experience. These three contexts span both micro and macro approaches to emotion; micro through moment-to-moment interactions and interpersonal relationships, and at a macro level across broader cultural contexts. Second, taking a micro approach to social emotion research Parkinson and Manstead (2015) offer four different levels at which emotions are linked to social factors (4.2). First, the target of our emotions has a social influence. For example, we may express anger due to a personal insult. Second, how we appraise these targets could be affected by social factors such as the presence of someone else who responds in a particular way. Third, how individual emotional expression can lead to an effect on others, and fourth how emotions are suppressed for fear of influence on others, such as supressing our true feelings for the sake of a working relationship. Third, at the macro level, Stearns and Stearns (1985) suggest 'emotionology' is a concept that differentiates between collective societal expectations of emotions and individual and group emotional experience (4.1). Emotionology is defined as 'societies "take" on how emotions should be experienced and expressed towards particular groups and institutions' (Ulus and Gabriel, 2018, p.2). Considering emotions in this way draws attention to the societal influences on expression of emotion, whether implicit or explicit (Stearns and Stearns, 1985). This highlights the importance of how emotional values change over time and when researching emotional experience, emotionology helps researchers identify the

cultural and societal values apparent at the time of the study. The concept can be used to determine the value we place on particular occupational groups which may be articulated through our upbringing, training and education, the media and internet; also described as a ‘place’ where we can both feel and express emotions that are deemed appropriate (Fineman, 2010).

How do I take a social approach to emotion?

My review of the emotions literature has demonstrated that there is a great deal of incompatible, even incommensurable, theories of emotion. This study seeks to explore how people experience emotions, how they theorise/understand them and how they interpret their responses to events. As Denzin (2007, p.3) states in relation to the experience of emotion, it ‘locates the person in the world of social action’. Therefore emotion ‘refers back to’ both the context of our experience of it and those we experienced it in relation to. As participants in this study narrated their experiences of emotions they reported on that experience, attributing meaning to it, using their experiences of emotions as ‘signals of what is meaningful to us’ (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015, p.753).

Though the concept of emotionology may be useful to consider for a study where all participants belong to a specific occupational group, this study is positioned at a micro rather than a macro level. The experience of emotion is subjectively experienced and varies between individuals, though those experiences may be shared. For example, various social and cultural influences on the outward expression of emotion, such as a desire to appear professional, may result in little outward emotional expression being displayed.

So far in this section I have set the scene with a broad map of the emotion literature, set out varying definitions of emotions, and explained why I located this study within a social perspective on emotion. I next explore how emotions are expressed and what influences this. This will be followed with a review of emotional labour; though this is not the theoretical positioning for this study it is important due to its influence on the sociology of emotions. I will also discuss both positive and negative framing of emotion research and conclude this section by discussing why and how emotions can be managed.

Emotional Expression - How do we express our emotions and therefore how can they be studied?

> '…human emotional experience cannot be "measured", it can only be accessed from the "inside," through introspection and communicated to others through language' (Wierzbicka, 2009, p.11).

In highlighting the issues researchers face in understanding human emotion, Wierzbicka (2009) draws attention to the challenge of accessing others' experiences through language. However, whether language can precisely capture our emotional experience is debatable as the words we use to label our emotions are learned, leading to the 'distortion' of our emotional experiences (Boudens, 2005). For example, over 50 years ago Davitz (1969) created a dictionary of emotional meaning. This dictionary of 50 terms used to describe emotional experience, collated from commonalities across 50 study participants, does not account for the subjectivity of individual experience. Rather the result is a more abstract level of analysis that creates generalised labels of broad ranges of experience. In addition to the differing subjective experience of emotions, the label given to an emotional experience at one point in time is likely to differ at another point in time. Language results in linear expression, whereas our feelings are more dynamic and complex than the sequencing of events (Sandelands, 1988). However, use of metaphor, narratives, and the visual can help evoke how we feel beyond language to support that which is difficult to put into words (Boudens, 2005; Sandelands, 1988).

Discursive psychologists (5.3) suggest emotion metaphors are 'conceptual resources' which have various uses enabling us to both say and do things (Edwards, 1999, p.280). Emotion metaphors sit as broader narrative sequences to help us better understand what emotional experiences mean (Edwards, 1999). Coupland et al.'s (2008) empirical study of the emotional experiences of teachers and managers/administrators in a further education college used discourse analysis to explore how emotions were constructed through language in the research interview, which surfaced the emotion display rules associated with their roles and work identities. Their study was concerned with how study participants talked about their and others' emotions, viewing 'emotional language as a rhetorical performance' (Coupland et al., 2008, p.332) where they found teaching staff 'upgraded' their experiences of emotions and managers/administrators 'downgraded' them in their

accounts. The emotions participants expressed were influenced by social rules (Goffman, 1959), a point I expand on in the following section.

What influences the expression of emotions in organisations?

Though it is argued that 'work is saturated with emotion' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995, p.119), emotions are still subject to rationalisation and control (Bolton, 2005; Lindebaum, 2017). Specific emotions are suggested at the forefront of organisational control, such as 'guilt, fear, shame, anxiety or "looking happy"', shaped by organisational culture and feeling norms (Fineman, 2003, p.23). Lindebaum (2017, p.2) argues that emotion represents 'a prominent tool of repressive social control in terms of how workers both experience and express it' where he suggests shame, guilt and happiness have a social function where they are exploited in organisations. For example, he suggests the experience of shame can result in a breach of a positive view of the self, and/or of our moral behaviour; behaviour which work colleagues favour which may damage our relationships with others if it is breached. However, shame may also be used by management to ensure we meet workplace objectives where if we do not achieve them we may be shamed in front of others. Therefore, shame can be subject to social control in organisations. In this section I consider the influences on emotional expression in organisations; in other words what causes us to control or manage our emotions and by whom. Emotions can be 'managed'; both by individuals and organisations, and in this section I consider why this might be the case.

Emotion regulation can be defined as 'the ways individuals influence the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions' (Gross, 1999, p.557). Gross (2013) distinguishes between the emotions we regulate as individuals (intrinsic regulation) and those regulated by others (extrinsic regulation). Therefore there is a social nature to the management/regulation of emotions. However, Burkitt (2018) argues that a key issue with the literature on emotion regulation is the implication that emotions require 'managing' and are therefore viewed as 'disruptive'. He argues that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic regulation does not go far enough and suggests it underplays the relational nature of emotion, where 'individuals affect one another and so generate emotion' (Burkitt, 2018, pp.172-3). Emotional expression may not

be ‘managed’ solely for individual reasons but also due to relational, social and cultural influences.

Goffman (1959, 1967) suggested that emotions can be managed as a result of social influences, which he referred to as ‘the arts of impression management’ (Goffman, 1959, p.203). For example, we might express what we believe to be a socially desirable face in order to avoid feeling shame or embarrassment. Like a theatrical performance ‘emotions can be learned’ (Gabriel, 1998, p.1330). Such sociological perspectives to emotion management hold that emotional feeling and expression is subject to culturally accepted norms (Lively and Weed, 2014). These cultural norms have been described as ‘feeling rules’, a term first introduced by Hochschild (1979) that refers to how individuals try to alter their internal feelings or expressions to fit external display rules. Feeling rules can lead to a match or mismatch between internally experienced feelings and those that are externally displayed (Hochschild, 1979; Thoits, 1985). External display rules can be enforced in organisations through devices such as scripts, typical in customer facing work, where worker response is prescribed by organisational norms and practices (Hochschild, 1983; Höpfl, 2002; Linstead, 1995). Hochschild (1979, p.561) defined emotion management as ‘the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling’. She argued that expressions of emotion can be managed through surface or deep acting (Hochschild, 1983); the former where we attempt to change our private feelings, the latter where we disguise our feelings that we publicly show to others. In the workplace emotions may be managed for organisational gain, and this is what Hochschild referred to as the ‘commodification of emotions’ at the heart of her theory of emotional labour which I will shortly discuss in detail.

Bolton (2005) developed a four-fold typology of workplace emotion management. Two types can be equated with Hochschild’s concepts of ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotion work’; pecuniary and presentational emotion management. Pecuniary is where emotions are managed for commercial gain, for instrumental reasons, presentational is similar to ‘emotion work’ where emotions are subject to social feeling rules. However, she adds two further examples of emotion management - prescriptive and philanthropic emotion management. Prescriptive is where professional or organisational rules are applied, philanthropic is where we choose to ‘offer that little extra’ as a ‘gift’ underpinned by social feeling rules (Bolton, 2005,

p.97). She argues that organisational actors ‘effortlessly move from one performance to another’ (Bolton, 2005, p.98) rather than being bound to one type of emotion management. Emotion management, therefore, is not always organisationally controlled. For example, as individuals we may manage our emotions to maintain status or personal acceptance into a group (Lively and Weed, 2014), for performance-related reasons which may be driven by organisational outcomes and reward (Parkinson, 1996), or to avoid disciplinary action for what is deemed inappropriate behaviour (Wingfield, 2010). We may do so by changing our physical state, by reinterpreting situations to make them appear less intense, or even by changing the terms we give to our experiences (Lively and Weed, 2014).

Geddes and Lindebaum (2020) summarise the various reasons for and influences on emotional expression at work. These range from personal motives such as the desire to ‘feel good’ or experience relief, to relational reasons such as the achievement of team goals and to develop interpersonal networks, to organisational reasons such as perceptions of ‘appropriate’ workplace displays, or various ‘display rules’. These ‘display rules’ may be due to professional norms, commercial reasons (emotional labour), be ‘socially derived’ between colleagues, and/or arise from hierarchical status.

From this review of the literature on the reasons for and influences on emotional expression in the workplace, it can be seen that it is not only organisations that can control our emotions, but individuals may also have their own motivations which arise from relational, social and cultural influences.

Emotional Labour

It is near impossible to review the literature on workplace emotions without reference to Hochschild, one of the pioneers of the sociology of emotions in the late 1970s. Indeed, Ooi and Ek (2010, p.303) state ‘the concept “emotional labour” is so entrenched in the social sciences that it hardly needs a reference’. The publication in 1983 of her influential text analysing emotion management in the service industry, *The managed heart: The commercialization of human feeling,* introduced the concept of emotional labour (Bericat, 2016), positioned within ‘the social’ on my map of emotions (4). Hochschild (1983) differentiated between ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotion work’. Emotional labour is where emotions are controlled and required by

employers, whereas emotion work is not exploitative, but used in our private lives to control emotions in social contexts. She defines emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display: emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*' (Hochschild, 1983, p.7). Taking a Marxist perspective, this exchange value is where employers define various rules and expectations in how employees behave in the interests of profit (Wharton, 2009).

Hochschild's initial study was situated in the airline industry, where she considered the emotional labour of air stewards. Subsequent studies extended her work in this occupation (see for example: Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Taylor and Tyler, 2000). A surge of studies in other service-related occupations followed such as: customer facing service work in hotels (Kim, 2008), waitresses and fast food workers (Hall, 1993; Lashley, 1999; Leidner, 1993), retail workers (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990), financial services (Korczynski, 2003; Leidner, 1991), call centre workers (Lewig and Dollard, 2003), and caring occupations such as nursing (James, 1989). However, with the growth of interest in emotional labour, studies extended beyond the service sector into other occupations such as: medical students (Smith and Kleinman, 1989), legal professions (Lively, 2002; Pierce, 1995), management consultants (Iszatt-White and Lenney, 2020), lecturers (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004), teachers (Hebson, Earnshaw and Marchington, 2007), personal trainers (George, 2008), adventure guides (Sharpe, 2005), and in occupations where more solemn emotions are displayed such as nightclub bouncers, debt collectors, and undertakers (Noon, Blyton and Morrell, 2014). Particularly relevant to my study, one recent empirical study explores the emotional labour of HR managers (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014; 2018). O'Brien and Linehan (2018) found HR managers are required to meet emotion display rules in order to achieve tasks and support organisational relationships with line managers. In contrast to studies of emotional labour in service occupations, they found that HR managers have more autonomy than 'front of house' employees and their work is not scripted or passive. Rather they suggest their emotional display is more complex 'backstage' than in customer-facing roles, due to the broader range of context specific emotions they are required to display. For example, they found HR managers took an active and at times strategic role to 'play' situations, such as in trade union negotiations.

As emotional labour has diverged into multiple academic disciplines outside its service sector origins and has broadened its influence, it is suggested it has become an increasingly difficult concept to review (Ooi and Ek, 2010). However, over the last 15 years continued academic interest in emotional labour has been fuelled by increased media publicity concerning its ethical and legal associations, making it a continuing relevant issue in organisations (Grandey and Melloy, 2017). Despite this, some argue the concept of emotional labour has reached methodological saturation and is 'stalled at a crossroads' (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015, p.324).

Given the reach of Hochschild's work it is not surprising it has its critics. It is said to be absolutist in attempting to separate our personal and private lives, oversimplifying a complex phenomenon (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Brook, 2009; Korczynski, 2002; Tolich, 1993). Emotion management and the associated processes for hiding emotions are also critiqued for overlooking the unconscious and relational aspects of emotion by privileging emotions and their relationship with identity and social norms (Theodosius, 2006). Bolton (2000, p.164) suggests emotion researchers have taken the 'emotional labour bandwagon' where emotional labour is used as a catch-all term for emotion research in organisations.

Why study how emotions are experienced and not take the 'emotional labour bandwagon'?

Emotional labour emphasises how our emotions are managed leading to a public display, rather than how our emotions are internally experienced; the latter being the primary focus of this study. Classifying all emotion management in one category (emotional labour) fails to consider employees ability to manage emotional situations with what might be deemed an appropriate response using their skills and experience (Bolton, 2005). So in studying a construct such as emotional labour, the breadth and nuance of emotional experience is underplayed and influences of emotional display are restricted to the profit motive. By contrast, this study explores how participants subjectively experience emotions and the relationships between people and the world around them. This subjective experience makes it difficult to generalise what are 'good' or 'bad' emotions and therefore through this study I elicit the breadth of emotional experience.

'Positive or negative' emotions – labelling emotional experiences 'good' or 'bad'

Researchers tend to prioritise negative emotions and their effects over positive emotions (Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate and Fletcher, 2011). Emotional labour, for example, is critiqued for over-emphasizing its negative impact with suggestions it can lead to favourable outcomes, such as creating positive effects on employees and customers at whom it is directed (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015). However, labelling emotions that are 'positive' as good and 'negative' as bad is an incorrect assumption made by some researchers (Elfenbein, 2007), as what might be experienced positively by one person may be experienced negatively by others. Lindebaum and Jordan (2012) argue 'symmetrical assumptions' have been made around discrete emotions, whereby positive emotions lead to positive results and vice versa. This is the case within the field of positive organisational scholarship, where such symmetrical positive assumptions are made. For example, that happy employees lead to happy workplaces and positive organisational outcomes, driven by a changing employment relationship where there is reciprocal satisfaction between employer and employee (Fisher, 2010). However, more critically oriented perspectives argue positive psychology is used to manipulate and 'fit' employees into an organisational mould; what is seen to be 'good/positive' performance equals organisational benefit, with a dark side rather than a bright side (Fineman, 2006). Within my map of the emotions literature, positive organisational scholarship (POS), (5.1) is positioned as one of the individual psychological theories of emotion. The field is developing popularity in both HR practice and gaining academic momentum and therefore will be further considered.

As a stream of POS, positive psychology has gained both academic and mainstream popularity since the turn of this century. Research on positive emotion has been 'legitimised' over the prior attention given to stress, depression and negative outcomes (Fisher, 2010), through evidencing positive physical and mental health and well-being outcomes for individuals (Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate and Fletcher, 2011). Popularised books have been published by positive psychologists with titles such as how to achieve '*Authentic Happiness'* and to '*Flourish'* (Seligman, 2002; 2011). In such texts and underpinning POS, the premise is that positive emotions like joy, pride and gratitude have transformational effects or 'upward spirals' which improve personal performance (Fredrickson, 2003; Meyer and Meyer, 2018). In addition,

positive psychology is suggested to be a support to human resources by developing their resilience, optimism and wellbeing as a means of preparing employees before being exposed to implementation of HR practices (Paul and Garg, 2014).

However, Fineman (2006) argues the field of positive scholarship needs to be more critical and contests the distancing of positive from negative emotions as both are connected. Indeed, Bogazzi (2003) argues how emotions can be both positive and negative. For example, being envious of someone doing well is a positive evaluation which may make us feel low about personal achievements. Positioning the turn to the positive as underpinned by a moral agenda rooted in humanism, Fineman (2006) argues its attraction is that it is an alternative to the 'moral malaise' of a consumer-driven society as it offers the prospect of virtuous lives rather than material wealth. He suggests HRM interventions such as appreciative enquiry, emotional intelligence, empowerment, high performance work systems and organized 'fun' at work demonstrate an 'engineering' of the positive through tools which simply further management control. This is the 'dark side' of positivity and those who do not fit the organisational mould become suspicious of management intention (Warren, 2005). HR practitioners are tasked with creating engaged workforces and meaningful work. I question whether that is their responsibility.

I did not take a polarised approach to either 'good' or 'bad' emotions or make symmetrical assumptions but gave focus to the breadth of emotional experience (Fineman, 2006). I made no prior assumptions about the impact of emotional experiences as one of my research questions asks 'How do they evaluate those experiences?' Rather than exploring discrete emotions, exploration of the breadth of both positive and negative workplace experiences enabled consideration of concurrent and multi-layered emotions. I next consider how HR practitioners navigate their emotional experiences. This is important given the emotional demands of their role.

Navigating emotionally demanding work

Research into how we manage our emotions in the workplace suggests rationality is privileged in organisational life, otherwise why would we need to 'manage' our emotions? This is why one of my secondary research questions considers the approaches HR practitioners take when navigating emotionally demanding work. HR

practitioners' daily working lives involve handling emotionally charged situations (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014) and I sought to understand how they do this.

Literature from scholars exploring emotionally challenging work, such as those who deliver bad news in organisations include HR-driven practices; for example, downsizing work (Clair and Dufresne, 2004; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Molinksy and Margolis, 2006), handling disciplinaries (Jones and Saundry, 2012) and bullying complaints (Cowan and Fox, 2015), performance reviews (Ilgen and Davis, 2000), and selection for promotion (Lemons and Jones, 2001). Those who deliver bad news use numerous tactics to make the task more palatable. Much research in this area originates from communication research, such as demonstrating reluctance and the 'MUM effect' (Rosen and Tesser, 1970). For example, messengers may procrastinate when faced with sending bad news due to the self-concern of being seen as 'the bad guy' (Marler et al., 2012), distort bad news by softening or reframing intended negative messages (Fisher, 1979; Frost, 2004), use indirect email communication rather than face-to-face conversations (Sussman and Sproull, 1999), and send text messages rather than making telephone calls (Westerman et al., 2014).

Downsizing involves reducing the number of employees in order to improve organisational profitability (Molinsky and Margolis, 2006). Empirical studies into downsizing which explore the experience of the downsizer present the task as emotionally draining. Downsizers can feel isolated, experience conflicts with personal values and an adverse impact on well-being, though self-justify the task if downsizers perceive victims to be fairly treated (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Wright and Barling, 1998). Approaches to navigate emotionally demanding work such as downsizing tend to categorise behaviours into models which distance and 'neutralise' emotions. A summary of these follows.

Clair and Dufresne (2004) found three distancing reactions used to handle emotionally demanding work in downsizing: emotional, cognitive, and physical. Emotional distancing is described as a way of psychologically distancing oneself from negative emotions, for example, by depersonalizing victims' identities or using humour. Cognitive distancing can be achieved through demonstrating fairness and a way of neutralizing the pain of the task itself. Justice theory and emotions have also

been linked (Stets, 2012). Where procedural justice is in place and procedures have been fair and aligned to expected outcomes, positive feelings are experienced, whereas negative feelings are experienced when unfair procedures are perceived to be in place. Demonstrating procedural fairness and treating recipients with dignity is a means of legitimising bad news, by behaving in a manner deemed professional and ethical (Bies, 2013; Lavelle, Folger and Manegold, 2016). Finally, physical distance or the proximity to victims may make the task more challenging for 'executioners'. For example, if located in an office close to affected employees, executioners may remove themselves due to the negative emotions of a situation or person (Clair and Dufresne, 2004).

Further empirical studies offer similar typologies of approaches to navigate difficult work, such as differing response styles ranging from personalised to depersonalised and engaged to disengaged (Molinksy and Margolis, 2006). In contrast to Clair and Dufresne's (2004) findings that psychological distancing is the norm, Molinsky and Margolis (2006) found 54% of participants engaged with their own authentic emotions and those of recipients, taking personalised approaches to acknowledge human emotions. This was at odds with organisationally prescribed approaches such as script-following, protocols and norms.

Other models suggest emotions can be 'normalized'. For example, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) suggested four devices can be used to control emotional expression: neutralising, buffering, prescribing, and normalizing of emotions. Neutralising techniques include minimising time on emotional interactions to limit emotional exposure; buffering involves separating emotional from rational tasks by enclosing them in job roles or to discrete events; prescribing includes using scripts and feeling rules to supress emotions; and normalizing includes reframing emotions in a rational way, or using humour to diffuse or save face. Normalizing emotion is also described as a process whereby emotions that may be perceived as undesirable or unwanted in organisations become ordinary (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002); for example, where over time the impact of the emotion is reduced due to frequent experience.

What are the implications of these models and how might they apply to HR practitioners?

An assumption that those handling emotionally demanding work are required to 'normalize' their emotions presumes organisations are controlling emotions, viewing emotions as abnormal. This demonstrates a privileging of the rational organization. When applying such devices to HR work, attempts to compartmentalize the emotional and the rational appear challenging. HR practitioners are expected to oscillate seamlessly between caring and control, be empathetic to employees but at the same time enforce the rules through policies and procedures (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014). A segregation of task as emotional or rational does not delineate as simply as is suggested. Emotional experiences cannot simply be 'buffered' into discrete events. Generalised models such as those I have described which try to lock away unwanted emotions for those who navigate emotionally demanding work do not account for 'genuine' emotional display or the breadth of emotional expression.

In summary and in relation to how emotionally demanding work is navigated, approaches may be organisationally scripted, tactics deployed that 'normalize' or 'neutralize' emotion (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002), or individuals may actively manage their emotions to distance themselves from emotionally demanding situations. Use of terminology such as 'normalize' and 'neutralize' suggest emotional displays in organisations are not considered 'normal' and much organizational emotion research assumes emotions are to be controlled rather than embraced in everyday emotional interactions. In developing understanding of how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives, I surface emotional expression that is controlled in public, thereby extending knowledge of the influences on those responsible for HR work.

HRM and emotions: What conclusions can be drawn from this review?

Having reviewed the literature on HRM, the HR role and emotion research, what links have been made between the two and how do these relate to my research questions? Ashkanasy et al. (2017) argue that HRM scholars have made few attempts to link emotions and emotion regulation to HRM practices. They argue

there is little point in studying human behaviour without consideration of emotions, given the last 30 years have seen a considerable body of literature acknowledging how emotions are an embedded and important feature in organisational life. Taking core HR practices ranging from recruitment and socialisation, performance management and reward, to training and development, they make the case for linking emotions with each of these HR activities. They use examples such as the role of intuition in selection decisions, training emotional regulation techniques and recruiting those with 'emotional intelligence' or 'positive' emotional traits. However their analysis, as others before them, falls short of considering the HR practitioners themselves by focusing on the impact of the practices they are responsible for i.e. those they design and disseminate through organisations. They acknowledge O'Brien and Linehan's (2014) research into the emotional challenges of the HR role but go no further as this is not the purpose of their review.

HR work requires both careful handling of other people's emotions, and HR practitioners' own. Regardless of academic debates about what HR is 'for', the reality of HR practitioners' day-to-day working lives is that they are responsible for handling emotionally-demanding and difficult situations. One survey of HR practitioners recounted the diverse nature of such work; from resolving delicate issues with transgender employees, to ending employment for those with terminal illnesses (Wiscombe, 2001). In relation to their role in organisational bullying, Cowan and Fox's (2015, p.130) study elucidates the 'emotional push and pull'; the tensions for HR practitioners trying to demonstrate both empathy (to bullying victims) and remaining neutral while seeking facts when investigations are underway. The challenges of emotional work for HR practitioners has only recently been generally considered in empirical studies (Hiillos, 2004; O'Brien and Linehan, 2014; 2018), and more specifically in relation to the effects on themselves as 'toxin handlers' (Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014). However, these studies have a different focus to the emotions experienced from doing HR work.

In summary, empirical studies of HR practitioners' working lives to date underplay the emotional nature of HR work and do not consider how emotions are experienced by those in the HR role. The academic literature is remote from the lived experiences of HR practitioners, there is sparse empirical work into how they do their jobs (Fassauer, 2020; O'Brien and Linehan, 2014), and in particular the emotionally

demanding nature of the work is overlooked. Therefore, this study provides insights into this underexplored area by asking ‘How do HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives?’ Exposing this enables more to be learned about the implications on those holding HR roles.

Chapter 3 - Methodology: Researching emotion from a narrative perspective

In this chapter I explain the research philosophy which underpins this study, the methodological approach taken, and the methods of data collection and interpretation used. I will justify and demonstrate how I remained consistent with my subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological positioning, set out why I used narrative theory to underpin the study, and explain how participant-led photo-elicitation methods helped me to research others' emotions. I detail what I did at each stage and why. In addition, I reflexively consider my positionality in the research, exposing my emotions during the research process, and evaluate my overall research approach. I conclude by discussing how I addressed potential ethical issues. My research design is summarised in table 3.1.

Table 3.1 – Summary of research design

Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Methods of data collection	Methods of data interpretation
Subjectivist	Interpretivist	Narrative	Qualitative methods Photo-elicitation - Participant-led photo-interview	Narrative thematic analysis Mimetic and Diegetic

Research Philosophy

Research philosophy examines the underpinning assumptions of the adopted research approach (Maylor and Blackmon, 2005). The start point is to understand the nature of reality; the ontological assumptions which establish 'what is out there to know' (Grix, 2010, p.68). The ontological position taken in this study is subjectivist. Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge and 'what and how we can know about it' (Grix, 2010, p.68). Epistemology is important to researchers as it requires consideration of how we come to know the world and the legitimacy of knowledge (Bryman, 2016). The epistemological position taken in this study is interpretivism.

Two contrasting epistemological positions are positivism and interpretivism. Those adopting a positivist epistemology consider that the social world can be studied using similar methods to the natural sciences (Bryman, 2016). Positivism is concerned with the study of phenomena that can be measured, observed and explained; ignoring that which is subjective and seeking to create knowledge that can be generalized (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012), rather than subjectively situated and relative to time and place. At the opposite end of the continuum, interpretivism is associated with the work of Weber where in the social sciences researchers seek to understand (verstehen), rather than explain (eklären) or establish causality as is done in the natural sciences (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivists emphasise the meanings that people give to the social world, recognising that meanings are subjectively constructed by people and therefore their interpretations are likely to be fluid and emergent (Grix, 2010). Interpretivism can be defined as an approach to generating knowledge which 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p.67). Researchers adopting this position acknowledge that there is no universal truth and therefore study how their research participants understand and construct their realities (Furlong and Marsh, 2010). Therefore, in this study what is important is how people interpret and understand their experiences of emotions. These interpretations need to be understood in their cultural and historical context (Furlong and Marsh, 2010), for example, the influences on the expression of emotions.

Bryman (2016, p.26) contends that interpretivism was influenced by three streams. First, hermeneutics defined as 'the theory and method of interpreting human action'. Second, phenomenology, the study of 'things themselves' concerned with how we make sense of surrounding phenomena but 'bracket out', or suspend prior knowledge of existing understandings (Crotty, 1998), and symbolic interactionism, derived from sociology and social psychology, concerned with the meanings given to things and actions through social interactions. I will expand briefly on hermeneutics rather than phenomenology and symbolic interactionism because hermeneutic philosophy underpins my research.

Hermeneutics places importance on the examination of talk or text in its broader context (Tracy, 2013). This can be further explained where researchers interpret data, such as talk turned into text, by an empathic consideration of an experience

from the perspective of the teller, a first form of interpretation. A second form of interpretation considers the context in which the data was spoken/written, where researchers move back and forth between both interpretations in an iterative way (Tracy, 2013). Since a narrative perspective informs this study, context, talk and text were important as I considered participants' experiences in 'time, place and relationships' where:

> 'Narrative inquiry is a way of inquiring into experience that attends to individuals' lives but remains attentive to the larger contexts and relationships within which lives are nested' (Clandinin, Cave and Berendonk, 2017, p.91).

In considering my role as researcher, an interpretivist positioning acknowledges my influence on the research topic, a double hermeneutic where my experiences influence my interpretations of contextualised participant experiences (Cunliffe, 2011). Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) suggest interpretivist researchers follow this hermeneutic circle as a means of understanding and interpreting their research, as existing knowledge helps create new understandings in an iterative way. This would not be acknowledged by researchers adopting a positivist epistemology, believing they can separate themselves from their research subjects in a detached and objective way; a single hermeneutic (Cunliffe, 2011).

The relationship between ontology and epistemology

So far, I have separated my ontological and epistemological positioning into broad but distinct positions. In considering the relationship between ontology and epistemology and the assumptions made in organisational research, Burrell and Morgan (1979) identified four paradigms which they argued stand independent of each other (Bryman and Bell, 2003): functionalist, interpretative, radical structuralist and radical humanist. Developing these ideas further, Morgan and Smircich's (1980) typology illustrated a continuum of subjectivist to objectivist research, which Cunliffe (2011) argues is based on an outdated 'subject-object dualism' challenged by the next 30 years of developments in research. Philosophical and theoretical developments around, for example, dialogism, post-structuralism, socio-materiality and critical realism have blurred this dualism. She suggests this is the case as subjects (generally conflated with human agency) and objects (material artifacts, principles, laws) can not necessarily be independent of each other but can be intertwined. For example, objects as well as subjects can have agency, exemplified

through socio-materiality theory which considers the interrelationship between the two (Luhman and Cunliffe, 2013). Therefore, Cunliffe (2011) 'revisioned' the subject-object dualism with three knowledge problematics of 'intersubjectivism, subjectivism and objectivism'. Each problematic has its own ontologically and epistemologically situated orientations covering six issues of 'relationality, durability, location of meanings, historicity, mediation and form of knowledge'. The problematics are deliberately overlapping to demonstrate both the tensions and fluidity of research (Cunliffe, 2011, p.653). A summary of each knowledge problematic and explanation of my positioning within the subjectivist problematic follows.

The objectivist problematic is concerned with observation, categorisation and causality, seeking patterns and generalizations about human behaviour (Cunliffe, 2011). The ontological assumptions of the objectivist problematic take a realist world view, assuming that a real world exists independently of us (Cunliffe, 2014) and relationships are studied between phenomena outside their naturally occurring context. Knowledge is viewed as replicable, seeking to explain, predict and identify causality, and meanings are attributed to common and literal understandings of words. Time is experienced in a universal and linear way. The researcher is detached from the world they are studying thereby taking a single hermeneutic (Cunliffe, 2011). This is not the position I have taken.

This study is situated in the subjectivist problematic which assumes social and organizational 'realities' are shaped and maintained in the relationships and conversations between human beings in their social world relative to time and place and therefore with no universal truth (Cunliffe, 2011). My research questions explore how study participants experience and talk about their emotions in relation to their work, thereby acknowledging that participants' emotions are relative to context, time and place, connecting them to their world. This ontological position assumes there is no external independent reality. The subjectivist problematic positions knowledge as embedded in contexts, in everyday conversations, defined as 'pragmatic, common sense knowledge' (Cunliffe, 2011, p.656). Meaning is located in everyday experiences and interactions between people and their world. This is why I sought to understand participants' experiences of emotions relating to their work. The experiences and realities participants shared with me are not predictive of others' behaviour as they are specific to their context and enable deeper understanding of

the subjective influences on their worlds. However, their experiences may resonate with others.

The intersubjectivist problematic considers relationships with others and how meaning is shaped together, with social reality shaped in moments in time and space drawing on relational and embodied experience (Cunliffe, 2011). In differentiation to the subjectivist problematic, interpretation is made 'between us' and a relational ontological position suggests 'we are always selves-in-relation-to-others' (Cunliffe, 2011, p.657). Though both subjectivist and intersubjectivist problematics take a broadly similar ontological and epistemological positioning as opposed to the objectivist problematic, this study remains subjectivist because my interest lies in individual experiences and interpretations rather than the relational, shared interpretations between people. For example, rather than reflecting on the issues raised in the interview together with study participants (intersubjective), I was reflective on participants and on myself, using the interview discussion to better understand differing meanings and interpretations (subjective). Through the remainder of this chapter I demonstrate consistency with a subjectivist problematic.

Narrative

In this section I discuss the theoretical underpinning to the narrative methodology with which I carried out this study. I begin by explaining what narratives are, where they can be found, what they do and mean. I discuss narrative philosophy, how the narrative paradigm relates to narrative knowledge, and clarify the terms 'narrative' and 'story'. I conclude by justifying why a narrative methodology was used to understand the experience of emotions.

What is a narrative?

Definitions of narrative are broad-ranging and well debated (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). However, one simple definition from Polkinghorne (1988, p.36) posits narrative as 'the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful'. Narratives are a means of communication which help us to understand, make sense of and evaluate our experiences (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011). This is both a way of 'reasoning' and 'representation'. In other words, how we understand and tell others about our world, and where we can consider and make sense of our

actions (Richardson, 1995). In considering further definitions of narrative, Fisher (1984, p.2) refers to narration as 'a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or ideas that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them'. This definition raises two initial considerations; the first being where narratives are to be found, the second being the importance of the connection or sequencing of events, which is disputed by some narrative scholars (Boje, 2001; Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004). I discuss both next.

Fisher (1984, p.2) suggests narration can be 'words and/or ideas'. Narratives can be found in novels, fairy tales and myths, in our personal and social histories and the stories used in everyday life to explain our lives (Polkinghorne, 1988). However, taking oral and written narratives further, Bal (2009, p.3) explains that narratives are also found in 'images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that "tell a story"'. Narratives are numberless and ubiquitous in everyday life (Barthes, 1977). When seeking narratives of personal experiences for the purposes of research they are therefore not difficult to find as humans are storytellers (Fisher, 1984; Riessman, 1993). That is, narrative meaning of how HR practitioners both communicate details of their work and in the acts of communication make sense of them.

In relation to the importance of the sequencing of narrative, Polkinghorne (1988, p.1) suggests narratives are a means through which humans organize their experiences into 'temporally meaningful episodes'. This process of organization infers that when seeking to understand narrators' meaning, we need to show the connections between those episodes (Richardson, 1995). However, narrative meaning is gained by not just simply showing the connections but by analysing how seemingly disconnected events relate as part of a whole (Polkinghorne, 1988). In the retelling of first-hand experiences, the teller retrospectively makes sense of them (Gabriel, 2000). Meaning can be gained on two levels; as narrators make sense of their lives in their acts of communication, making connections between events, and also by the researcher through exploring those connections.

It is also important to understand narratives in the context in which they occur, because context gives meaning. The individual narratives used to interpret the world are situated within the broader context of cultural and social narratives, as Lawler (2002, p.251) suggests narratives 'circulate socially'. Elliott (2005, p.4) adds that

narratives have three important elements; they are ‘chronological’ in that they represent the sequential ordering of events, ‘meaningful’, and ‘social’ as they are created for a particular audience. Both Elliott (2005) and Polkinghorne (1988) highlight the importance of connection between events and meaning, however, Elliott’s introduction of the social element to narrative highlights at its most basic level the conversations between people. A speaker decides how many details to give the listener, what to exclude from their narrative, and this could be influenced by who the audience is, where the narrative is told and/or who might overhear (Elliott, 2005). The retelling of experiences through narrative is specific to time and place i.e. narratives have both a temporal and contextual nature (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Finally, I have used the word ‘narrative’ in this section rather than ‘story’. Whether a narrative is the same as a story is a well debated issue that I explore in detail later in this section when reviewing approaches to study narrative, but I first set out the approach I have taken in this study. A story is a specific type of narrative form requiring specific elements such as a beginning, middle and end, a coherent plot and characters; whereas a narrative can be less structured/fragmented i.e. not necessarily sequentially ordered or coherent. Human beings make sense of the world through talking and interacting with others. This might be through fully coherent structured stories with clear start or end points or through more disjointed and incoherent narrative accounts of our experiences. This is important when exploring our experiences of emotions which are not necessarily coherent. Emotions can be fleeting, fragmented, disjointed and experienced simultaneously. Our experiences of emotions do not have clear beginnings, middles and ends. I have therefore situated my approach to the study of emotions in a narrative rather than storytelling approach. Before elaborating on these differences, I set out the underpinning narrative philosophy and continue to use the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ interchangeably as the authors I cite have done.

The narrative paradigm and narrative rationality

Fisher (1985a) describes people as ‘homo narrens’ or storytellers who are ‘… authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature’ (Fisher, 1985a, p.86). He goes on to argue that the narrative paradigm emphasizes how people’s lives are not scripted or predetermined by ‘existing

institutions' but re-created by active participants either as authors or co-authors/audience members. Bruner (2004, p.694) states that 'in the end we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives'. The narrative paradigm, therefore, is a way of communicating through which we come to know ourselves and interpret our experience (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004). Meanings are interpreted from past and individualised events; a means of constructing our realities through rich descriptions and overlapping, multi-layered interpretations, demonstrating the plurality of meaning and competing narratives (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Narratives are constructed revealing how we understand and see our lives, rather than factual evidence of an objective 'reality' (Josselson, 2011).

Given that narratives are constructed, how do they become credible and relevant to us? Fisher's (1985b) extension of his earlier work on humans as storytellers considers *how* people consider the merits of stories within the narrative paradigm. In other words, how people 'adopt stories that guide their behaviour' (Fisher, 1985b, p.348). He suggests we apply principles of 'probability and fidelity … and considerations for judging the merit of stories, whether one's own or others' (Fisher, 1985b, p.349) where we consider how reasonable the story sounds to us, or whether we 'identify with it' (Whittle, 2015, p.174). Narratives are successful where they appear credible or enable us to see our worlds differently (Barry and Elmes, 1997), offering opportunities to change and learn more about ourselves and organisations (Whittle, 2015).

What is a narrative and what is a story?

I next consider whether it is important to distinguish between a narrative and a story. A review of narrative literature signals much dispute surrounding the two terms that some scholars separate and others conflate. Riessman (1993) states that directly opposing positions are taken by those that do distinguish between narrative and story (Boje, 2001; Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004; Czarniawska, 1997, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). Others use the terms interchangeably with no distinction (Brown, Stacey and Nandhakumar, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008; Watson, 2009a). Where a distinction is made between the terms narrative and story, a story tends to be viewed as a specific type of narrative with distinguishing features such as a beginning, middle and end structure, an identifiable plot, and coherent characters.

Narratives, on the other hand, may be viewed as more general accounts than stories (Luhman and Cunliffe, 2013), that are less structured and can be incomplete and disjointed (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004). Researchers taking a storytelling approach seek the connection and sequencing between events that create meaning through a sense of wholeness. Narrative scholars acknowledge meanings can be multiple and open to interpretation. However, in its broadest sense both narrative and storytelling scholars view narratives and stories as means to make sense of, guide and justify our lives (Fisher, 1984), acknowledging the power of narratives/stories to influence individual action (Luhman and Cunliffe, 2013).

Most scholars broadly agree that a narrative becomes a story through identification of plot. Plot turns an otherwise simple chronology into a more complex chain of events which are open to misinterpretation as static states change and actions have apparent meaning (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004). For example, Czarniawska (1997, p.78) states ‘a story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem’. The plot serves the purpose of creating a more coherent story (Polkinghorne, 1988); creating a narrative structure through which the reader or listener can finish the story in a conclusion where time, space and various events come together (Steers, 2008). Gergen (1998) on the other hand suggests ‘intelligible narratives’ feature a number of elements: a goal or point with selected relevant events, temporal sequenced events with causal links, coherent characters whose identities remain stable, and signals for beginning and ending. However, Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje (2004) argue that these are the characteristics of stories, as narratives are less ordered than suggested by Gergen, with characters or plots that are less coherent.

I close this section clarifying my position on the differing features between narratives and stories summarised in table 3.2 overleaf. However, I draw attention to those scholars who take differing interpretations to those I have given, highlighted in brackets below, which I discuss in the next section.

Table 3.2 Differing features of narratives and stories

Stories	Narratives
Complete standalone accounts with an identified structure of a beginning, middle and end. (*Boje [2001] disagrees and thinks stories can be incomplete, referring to them as 'antenarrative').	Incomplete accounts which may be disjointed or snippets of interpretations.
Sequenced events with causal links connecting events to generate meaning.	Events may be disjointed and fragmented. Meanings are polyphonic and open to interpretation.
An identifiable plot, which gives the story coherence. Repeatable, such as stories of significant events or actions of a heroine.	No discernible plot, the representation of an event or events i.e. something happens. There may or may not be coherence. (*Boje [2001] disagrees and thinks narrative comes after story and adds plot).
Coherent characters with stable identities.	Characters may be incoherent with differing identities.
Tend to have an identifiable genre i.e. tragedy, comedy, epic, romance and poetic quality. Importance placed on rhetoric.	Multiple meanings – the same account is told differently. (*Gabriel [1995] argues stories can also be ambiguous).

Why use a narrative methodology when studying the experience of HR practitioners' emotions in organisations?

In relating narratives to organisations, Rhodes and Brown (2005, p.178) state that:

> 'Narratives are means through which organizations are brought to life in the different ways that people can construct meaning and identity from organizational events and experiences. The organization is not regarded as an object of study, but seen rather to be subjectively and inter-subjectively constructed through the stories told by both researchers and organizational stakeholders'.

My interest is in what participants' narratives tell me about how HR practitioners experience the emotional aspects of their work. My subjectivist positioning assumes those emotional experiences are subjectively constructed within an organizational

context. I considered the multiplicity of meaning in the narratives and possible interpretations in line with my interpretivist epistemological positioning. This requires consideration of content, context and their significance to develop contextualised understandings of participants' narratives; narratives need a purpose (O'Connor, 2000). I have argued that narratives are fragmented, fluid and less structured than stories but this can still tell of the worlds of study participants (Lawler, 2002). I therefore took a narrative as opposed to a storytelling approach in this study. Seeking complete stories with required elements such as a plot and a signalled beginning, middle and end generates a one-sided, objectivised view of reality. This requires the researcher to choose and discard elements that do/do not fit the pre-determined story mould. Such an approach is not in line with the subjectivist positioning of this study.

Why use a narrative methodology in a study about emotions?

Narratives are a vehicle used to communicate intense emotional experiences through use of figurative language and are therefore a good way to access emotions indirectly (Boudens, 2005). For example, Gabriel (1991) suggests our everyday stories, casual remarks and jokes are used to help us express what we may find difficult to say straight. This is particularly important where emotions are a topic that may be difficult to talk about. However, emotions are exposed through participants' recollections and what they choose to share (Sturdy, 2003). The stories we tell, I mean this in the general sense of the word story rather than strict academic definition, expose the various ways emotions are constructed and talked about, by sharing display rules, scripts and interactions between actors (Ulus and Gabriel, 2018). In taking a narrative as opposed to a storytelling approach to study emotions, I acknowledge emotions are complex, and not complete phenomena with clear beginnings, middles or ends. Participants' experiences of emotion are 'situational, reflective, and relational' (Denzin, 2007, p.3). Therefore, in narrating their experiences of emotions they are not experienced in the same way and may be interpreted differently. There is no standard, identifiable plot to the experience of emotion. I found that some participants re-narrated their accounts of emotion during the interview.

This study is concerned with how participants experience and navigate emotions in their working lives. I considered how participants expressed their emotions when reporting on their past experiences, whether emotions were present in the interview when they narrated their experiences, and the context they narrated them in (a one-to-one research interview with a researcher who had prior experience of their work). Through my process of interpretation I explored the connections between participants' accounts, linking together aspects of participants' narratives which might otherwise appear disparate events. The narration of experience generated emotion as participants re-enacted the drama of their working lives in the interview through the retelling of stories about their everyday lives.

In conclusion, in this section I have discussed the narrative methodology that underpins this study, explained what narratives are and what they do, and explored the various approaches to the study of narrative. I next discuss the data collection methods used.

Methods of data collection

Qualitative and quantitative research strategies, or the overall approach to the research, are underpinned by differing theoretical, epistemological and ontological positions. However, in broad terms Bryman (2016) suggests qualitative research is oriented towards theory generation taking an inductive approach, grounded in an interpretivist epistemological position (Grix, 2010) and a subjectivist ontological positioning. This positioning assumes realities are constructed and emergent. By contrast, quantitative research emphasizes a deductive relationship between theory and research. It tests theories and is grounded in a positivist epistemological position, requiring rigidity or standardisation (Grix, 2010). Quantitative research tends to take an objectivist ontology assuming an objective independent reality. However, despite these broad differences between qualitative and quantitative research strategies, Bryman (2016) maintains they should not be overstated. For example, qualitative research can be conducted in a positivist way. Interviews are one illustrative method where researchers taking a positivist positioning use structured interviews to uncover facts, thereafter coding and analysing the data supported by statistical methods (Cunliffe, 2011). The choice of qualitative or

quantitative methods should relate to the research problem and research object (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) instead of privileging one over the other.

Which research strategy did I take and why?

I adopted a qualitative research strategy using methods which seek in-depth understanding and appreciation of the complexity and contextual influences on participants' interpretations of their social world (Ormston et al., 2014). This enabled me to better understand the complexities, sensitivities and contexts influencing individuals' experiences of emotions. Quantitative methods are not suited to studying individuals 'in their complex singularity' rather than as 'samples of larger groups in some presupposed classificatory system' (Sanger, 1996, p.20). I used photo-elicitation methods, a broad term describing the use of photographs to elicit opinions from participants (Warren, 2005), in unstructured interviews. The photographs elicited participants' narratives. Tracy (2013, p.25) suggests a 'qualitative methodology is better than quantitative methodology for richly describing a scene, or for understanding the stories people use to narrate their lives'.

Other reasons for using qualitative rather than quantitative methods are that this study was intended to be inductive rather than deductive as I did not test a theory or model of emotions in order to explain participants' behaviour. My aim was to generate theory from the data gathered. However, during data interpretation in order to gain a deeper level of understanding I used an abductive approach where I went back and forth between the data and the literature to account for my findings (Charmaz, 2011; Pierce, 1958). I considered what I found unexpected and surprising to help generate new ideas (Agar, 2010; Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman, 2008). Meanings emerged from the research context and study participants, generating emic understanding as opposed to describing the research scene through a predetermined, external lens which generates etic understanding (Tracy, 2013). My research problem required flexibility; there are no standard emotional responses, and I demonstrated sensitivity to the context from which the data emerged (Ormston et al., 2014). This would not be achievable using a quantitative research strategy. For example, I did not seek to quantify, count or predict emotional behaviour but to better understand subjective experience through the narratives elicited from discussion about participants' photographs. A study of emotion seeking to explain

emotional expression using quantitative methods might, for example, observe emotional facial and bodily displays, counting various displayed expressions and their causal relationship to different scenario-based triggers in a laboratory setting. Indeed, many psychological studies of emotion tend to take an 'inside-out' approach where emotions are studied as individual, isolated phenomena rather than in relation to others or the world around us (Fineman, 2010). As a qualitative researcher, I engaged with the social world and that of my participants.

What other qualitative research approaches might I have chosen?

There are many diverse research choices open to the qualitative researcher (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012) which are too broad to explore here, so I have chosen to use Cresswell's (2013) categorisation of five approaches to qualitative research; ethnography, case study, phenomenology and grounded theory, with narrative, the method adopted in this study, being the fifth. He argues this categorisation provides a broad framework against which to establish a rationale for the various qualitative research approaches that can be chosen. I overview and discuss the first four briefly before justifying the methods used in the next section of this chapter.

Ethnography is a participatory research method requiring the researcher to immerse themselves for a long period of time in the research field. Adopting an ethnographic approach enables observation of emotional experiences in-the-moment (Watson, 1995), potentially eliciting further depth. However, given the sensitive nature of HR work, field-based ethnography would raise insurmountable ethical and moral challenges. A case study approach uses defined boundaries to gain a deep understanding of the subject of the study or to compare a number of different cases (Cresswell, 2013). I did not choose a case study design because my intention was not to limit the findings to one organisation or compare specific organisational cases but to gain more breadth of understanding from participants across a diverse range of organisations. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the essence of an experience or lived phenomenon (Cresswell, 2013). My principal research question which asks 'How do HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives?' is better suited to a narrative approach to elicit nuanced understandings rather than aiming to understand the essence of a particular

phenomenon. In addition, the requirement for the researcher to suspend prior knowledge about the phenomenon, referred to as 'bracketing' (Bryman, 2016), would be challenging given my extensive experience as an HR practitioner. Finally, grounded theory is an approach focused on development of a theory to explain the subject or topic of interest (Cresswell, 2013). It is a systematic approach which involves coding data line by line, developing theoretical categories and moving back and forth between the data as it is collected and analysed (Charmaz and Bryant, 2016). Grounded theory is suggested a good approach when focusing on a process or action with clear-cut stages and where there is no or incomplete theory in relation to the subject of the study, as the aim is to develop theory grounded in the data (Cresswell, 2013). The issue with grounded theory is it results in generalisations of the data through the creation of categories, and therefore risks losing the richness gained through approaches such as narrative (Riessman, 2016). Having explained and justified my overall research approach, I next discuss my data collection methods; photo-elicitation methods in in-depth unstructured interviews.

Photo-elicitation methods

Many different terms are used in the visual research literature to define the various photographic research methods, which include 'photo-elicitation', 'photo-interview' and 'photo-voice', all with individual nuances. I adopt the following definitions of these three respective terms for this thesis.

First, photo-elicitation is a broad term used to describe the use of photographs to elicit opinions from participants; these can be photographs that either the researcher provides or the participant takes themselves, the latter also referred to as participant-led photography (Warren, 2018). Asking participants to show their personal experiences to others using photographs as interview stimulus was first defined as 'native image-making' by Wagner (1979) in his influential text on visual sociology. The word 'native' indicates how the method originated in anthropology (Warren, 2005), though anthropologists historically generated photographs and videos themselves in observational studies (Pink, 2013) where the researcher decided what to document (Harper, 1998). However, since Wagner's (1979) founding ideas, participant-led photography has developed within the social sciences as a means of better understanding participants' subjective experiences (Warren, 2005).

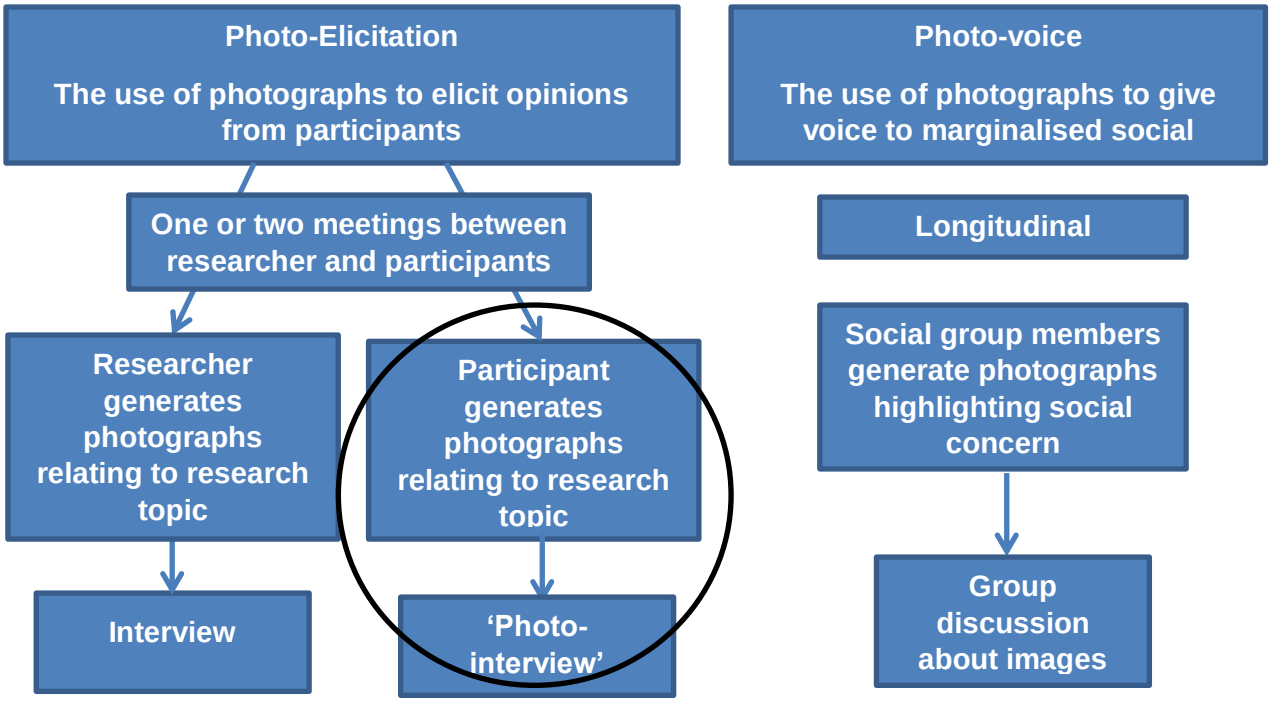
Second, photo-interview is the more specific term I will use to refer to an interview including participant-generated photographs as a means of eliciting participant views and opinions (Shortt and Warren, 2012). That is not to say that an interview is not used where researchers generate photographs in photo-elicitation, but Shortt and Warren (2012) distinguish between participant and researcher-generated approaches with this term. Participant-generated approaches are more commonly used in participatory visual research methods, i.e. where participants have a creative hand in the research process, choosing and making the image to be interpreted in subsequent interview discussion (Rose, 2016).

Third, photo-voice is another example of a participatory visual research method where photographs are typically used as a means to give voice to marginalised social groups, pioneered by Wang and Burris (1997). Members of the identified social group are asked to photograph their everyday lives reflecting the social issues of the research topic which are later discussed in facilitated group conversations (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001).

In contrasting photo-elicitation and photo-voice, Rose (2016) suggests photo-elicitation involves occasional encounters between researcher and participant limited to one or two interviews, and shorter timeframes than the longitudinal approaches used in photo-voice. In drawing similarities between photo-voice and photo-elicitation, she suggests they empower participants, though in different ways. Photo-elicitation empowers at a micro-level in the relationship between participant and researcher as participants have a say in why they took a particular photograph and what they chose to include or exclude. Participants become the expert as they explain photograph meaning to the researcher. Photo-voice is suggested to empower at a macro-level as it exposes the everyday realities of marginalised social groups through group discussion about the images to empower change, but ultimately with an aim of escalating upwards to drive broader social change (Rose, 2016).

An illustration of these three terms is summarised in figure 3.1 overleaf, where I have circled the approach I followed.

Figure 3.1 – Photo-elicitation and photo-voice



Why use photographs over other visual media?

Thus far I have only discussed photographs as one medium of visual research. However, visual research methods can include the use of videos, drawings, paintings, posters, collages, advertisements and web-based images; though in social sciences mainly photographs, films and diagrams are used (Rose, 2016). The increasing use of visuals is described as 'unprecedented' in both our everyday lives and in organisational research (Meyer et al., 2013, p.489) as we are bombarded by visual messages both in and outside of our homes, through the internet, TV and public billboards (Slutskaya et al., 2012). Bell, Warren and Schroeder (2014, p.1) argue that organisations are 'visually rich', influenced by image management strategies where, for example, brands, employees in service encounters, workplace designs and company reports require an organisational 'look'. They suggest this increasing focus on the visual is enabled by connective online and social media technologies where visual communication is as important as verbal communication. Bell and Davison (2013) suggest that in organisation studies, a focus on the visual enables new 'ways of seeing' to understand organisational realities, where they argue language has been privileged at the expense of the visual.

Within organizational research, Ray and Smith (2012) argue for the adoption of photographs as a beneficial medium over other visual research methods such as videos and hand drawings. Photographs are flexible in that they can be obtained from either the researcher, from existing organisational archived images or created by study participants, rather than asking participants to hand draw images leading to concerns about a lack of drawing skills (Rose, 2016). In comparison to videos, photographs are easier to make process and publish. They are a medium participants are familiar with and report interesting to participate in following participant-led approaches. Asking participants to make photographs is relatively simple and accessible, particularly given the popularity of smart phones, where little technical expertise is required and participants describe making photographs as a fun task (Warren, 2005). However, despite these benefits and an increasing body of literature advising how to conduct academic studies using photo-elicitation methods, Warren (2018) suggests empirical research using the method is sparse. However, she predicts this will change as academic journals accept more studies using photographic methods and doctoral research projects near completion.

What does the inclusion of photographs add to a narrative methodology?

Based on my pilot and full study, and a review of the literature, I concluded that using photographs encourages rich, additional narratives that interviews alone fail to engender. Images enable people to share more than they might be able to with words alone (Allen, 2015; Shortt and Warren, 2012). Harper (2002, p.23) suggests this is because they ‘mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews’, helping the researcher better understand participants’ experiences (Liebenberg, 2009) which might otherwise be difficult to find (Pink, 2013). Most pertinent to justify this study, using photographs in an interview can uncover emotions that might otherwise be concealed (Bagnoli, 2009; Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014) as they enable communication of the intangible, such as emotions (Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014).

As I highlighted when discussing narratives, a narrator decides what to include or exclude from their narrative to achieve a particular end (Riessman, 2008). Narrative knowledge is a means of constructing our realities through multi-layered interpretations (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Photographs also support the

construction of reality as they are ‘made’ rather than ‘taken’ (Harper, 2005). Participants decide what is important enough to capture through the camera and are influenced by three things: by in-the-moment motivations about what to include/exclude from the frame, by what is culturally and historically viewed as making a good photograph, and by considering what they think it will remind them of at a later viewing (Warren, 2018). This decision making is suggested to involve ‘the storying and enactment of the photographer’s journey through time and space for later consumption’ (Warren, 2018, p.242). This ‘later consumption’ occurs first in the interview, where the photograph is collectively viewed and meanings discussed, and second at the subsequent interpretation. The ‘storying’ of our experiences is particularly relevant to my narrative methodology as it is a means through which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes (Polkinghorne, 1988). Although images are cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’ (Bal, 2009, p.3), I am not interested in the narrative a photograph tells in isolation, rather it is the discussion about photograph meaning that is important, generating narratives that reveal understandings about how study participants see their lives.

Surely photographs tell the truth about our lives?

I pose this question provocatively. Naïvely we might assume photographs are evidence of an objective reality. Though positivists believe there is an objective reality ‘out there’ to test where ‘the facts speak for themselves’, interpretivists argue against the possibility of taking such a neutral position (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012, p.17). If we capture evidence of our worlds visually we might assume this is truth. However, this assumption denies that photographs are socially constructed objects. Sontag (1979, p.23) summarises this position stating:

> ‘Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks’.

The intended message conveyed to the viewer is based on subjective experiences of the world, so the meaning of the photograph is ambiguous in isolation (Warren, 2018). A photograph needs explanation. Becker (1998) highlights the importance of context when viewing images, as their meanings differ at different points in time. A photograph’s meaning is therefore dependent on personal and cultural experiences,

interpreted using the values and dual assumptions of participant and researcher; it does not offer a crystal clear view of reality (Liebenberg, 2009).

I next link these issues of truth in participant-led photo-elicitation to my narrative methodology. As with the construction of narratives where Fisher (1985b) suggested principles of probability and fidelity are used to judge the merit of narratives, this does not change with the introduction of photographs to elicit narratives. I am interested in the credibility and relevance of the narrative the photographs generate, rather than asking whether the photograph in itself tells the truth. Bell (2013, p.154) contends that using visuals in narrative research does not answer but 'complicates' the more general questions narrative researchers consider about truth, audience or representation. I counter that a photograph stabilizes a point in time the same way as an interview transcript of a narrative captures a conversation at the time. In both cases intended meanings can differ from the point of capture or interview to either a later viewing or re-reading of the transcript and can be shaped differently by and for different audiences (Riessman, 2008). For example, the words the researcher places under an image in a publication can give a very different meaning to the viewer than that intended by the photographer. From the photographer's perspective, different motives underpin their choice of image, angle, and lighting and so on (Warren, 2002). Different motives also underpin narratives such as to entertain, persuade or engage (Riessman, 2008). However, the ambiguity of narratives (including those generated from photographs) are well established as being as important as content (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004).

Having considered and justified why I used photographs as a method to support my narrative methodology, I next justify my choice of participant-led photography and expand on the specific approach taken with study participants.

Why ask participants to generate photographs rather than the researcher?

A participant-led approach is in line with my subjectivist problematic. In addition to the benefits already outlined, such as the participatory nature of the method and that new narratives and emotional talk are generated, Rose (2016) also argues participant-led approaches enable exploration of taken-for-granted experiences. Exploring what might be perceived as mundane encourages thinking beyond the surface meaning of the photograph. For example, a study of male butchers found the

inclusion of participant-generated photographs encouraged participants to speak about rarely discussed topics, such as the butchery display and other aesthetic positive aspects of their roles (Slutskaya et al., 2012). The surfacing of emotional and aesthetic experiences of their work had been previously concealed by their conforming to gender norms of working class men. Shortt and Warren's (2012) empirical study of hairdressers' workplace identities found photographs of objects or places, such as staff rooms, revealed rich narratives about how and why they were taken. Discussion about a photograph's meaning enables participants to reflect on and examine their everyday lives in a new way.

How else has participant-led photography been used across organisational research and are there any potential disadvantages?

Since Wagner's (1979) origination of the method, participant-led photography has been used across various topics such as; studying the identity of accountants (Warren and Parker, 2009), exploring liminal spaces (Shortt, 2015), and in organizational aesthetics (Warren, 2002) where participants were asked to 'show me how it feels to work here'. In considering previous visual research directly related to the topic of emotions in organisations, which is sparse, Vince and Broussine's (1996) empirical study explored how emotions are experienced in organisational change using a participant-led approach. Participants were asked to draw pictures, rather than take photographs, showing how they felt about the changes. Their study concluded that the externalisation of feelings through drawing enabled participants to reflect on and deal with the emotions experienced (Vince and Broussine, 1996). A potential disadvantage of this approach is that asking participants to draw can lead to concerns about drawing skills. However, at the time of their study over 20 years ago early digital cameras were expensive and their approach was potentially limited by the available technology, unlike the accessibility of smartphone cameras today.

Disadvantages of participant-led photographic approaches include issues such as participants making photographs that are off-topic, inappropriate or poor quality (Ray and Smith, 2012). Some of my participants made photographs that on the surface appeared to have little relevance to the study topic, but discussion about their meaning led to a different understanding than what the object was they had captured on camera. Poor quality photographs were not a concern, what was important was the narrative generated from it. Some participants needed reassurance that they had

brought the ‘right’ photographs to the interview (Rose, 2016). Facebook and Instagram are online contemporary examples of displaying deliberately chosen photographs which represent how we want others to see us (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). In the research encounter, similar motivations and influences arise to those experienced in our everyday lives that the researcher should acknowledge and consider when interpreting the data. Participants may bring images to the photo-interview they think the researcher would want to see. For example, one participant reflected on viewing all her photographs that there was not much emotion represented in them, but that they represented an administrative organisational function. This is a reminder that I am dealing with a photograph that is a ‘socially constructed artefact’, not evidence of an objective reality captured on film (Warren, 2018).

What did I ask my participants to do and why?

I asked participants to use their smartphones to take up to 10 photographs that represent ‘how it feels to work in HR’ and bring to a photo-interview. I added to the participant brief that if they could not find a relevant object to photograph they could draw an image which could then be photographed. The rationale for this inclusion was based on what I learned from the pilot studies.

I conducted two pilot studies using participant-led photo-elicitation in January 2016 and June 2017 (a timeline of my study can be found at appendix 2). In the January 2016 pilot, two participants were first interviewed without photographs and then interviewed a second time when they were asked to bring photographs (I had been introduced to visual research in a qualitative research methods module in the intervening time). One of the participants stated she found my instruction to take photographs of emotions in HR work difficult to interpret, however the resulting interview elicited rich narratives despite her concerns. The second participant did not raise any concerns and I also noticed the change in approach elicited richer data than in the first interview.

In order to pilot an approach where photographs were used for data collection at the first research encounter, and to provide more guidance to participants who need it, the June 2017 pilot tested a more formal approach where a written information sheet was provided with two different participants. The instructions stated that the choice of

image was entirely participant's choice and gave broad guidance on what to capture (appendix 3). For both pilot studies, participant consent forms were provided (appendix 4). I also suggested participants take some photographs representing both their best and worst experiences of HR work. This was intended to encourage reflections on participants' experiences of emotions and is linked to my research question 'How do participants evaluate their experiences?' The instructions were emailed to participants with an offer of a follow-up telephone call if needed ahead of the photo-interview. One of the participants asked for more information which was not due to lack of clarity in the brief, but reassurance that she was taking the 'right' photographs. She took eight photographs. The second participant took 10 photographs without requesting further information, though widened the brief by taking photographs of two images she had hand-drawn herself. She also included two images from licensed internet-sources which she uploaded to her smartphone as photographic images. This is a consequence of the digital features of smartphone technology rather than disposable cameras that were provided to participants when participant-led photo-elicitation originated. Although this was unexpected, it was not a negative as the narratives elicited from these images were relevant and insightful. Further, I did not want to change my entire approach due to what one participant did, or only ask for drawings, as Vince and Broussine (1996) did. This may have discouraged participation where participants lack confidence in their drawing skills. I suggested any participant drawings were still photographed so that all the data was presented in a consistent format.

The use of uploaded internet images is more problematic due to licensing and ownership issues, which could lead to ethical issues surrounding their usage now and in future publications. Therefore I did not suggest this in the participant brief. Despite this, six participants included photographs of internet images, slogans and cartoons in the main study. Smartphone technology enabled them to control/decide what to include. I discuss this further in the final section of this chapter on ethics in visual research.

Two further learning points were gained from this pilot study. First, one of the participants stated she would have taken more than 10 photographs but felt restricted by the participant instructions, which were later amended to state that this number was a guide. In the main study the most photographs any single participant

took was 14, the least was seven, which I considered good engagement with the process. Second, towards the end of the photo-interview I had a spontaneous idea to spread out all the photographs on the interview table for participants to add their reflections on viewing them as a collective group. I then asked the participant to group the photographs into those which broadly represented 'positive' or 'negative' experiences and we discussed why they had grouped them as such. This technique elicited additional relevant and insightful reflections at the end of the interview. I therefore used this approach at the end of the photo-interviews in the main study which elicited further insight and led to identification of the narrative across participants' accounts – doing repair work.

What preparation did I do ahead of the photo-interview?

Ray and Smith (2012) point out that the researcher needs to decide which photographs to discuss from those provided by participants or pre-organize them into themes. They suggest this allows the photographs to be related to the research questions. In line with my subjectivist approach I did not make these prior decisions. There was no pre-sifting ahead of the process of meaning creation in the interview. I did, however, ask participants to upload their photographs to a secure shared location ahead of the interview so that I could either print them or upload them to PowerPoint slides for an electronic viewing. Having tested both an electronic and physical viewing in the pilot studies, I decided to ask participants' preferences. The majority chose the printed option. Photographs were discussed at interview in an order chosen by participants, mostly the order they were taken, so as not to alter any intended narrative sequence.

The interview

In this section I explain the process I followed in adopting interviews as a research method, justify their use consistent with my research design and interpretivist epistemological positioning, and discuss my experiences of doing so. I discuss the nature of in-depth unstructured narrative interviews, the interviewer/interviewee relationship and the active nature of the interview as a site of co-production. I conclude with my self-reflexivity on the emotions I experienced during the interviews and whilst interpreting the data.

Unstructured narrative photo-interviews were conducted with the 11 study participants between June 2017 and April 2018. Each participant was interviewed once. I adopted a cross-sectional study design because I explored participants' current and past experiences captured at a point in time, rather than taking a longitudinal approach which reviews changes or comparisons over a longer time period (Gray, 2004). I chose this study design because it is typical when conducting situational qualitative interviews rather than more costly longitudinal ethnographic studies which track changes over a lengthy study period (Bryman, 2016). My research questions aimed to develop understanding of emotional experiences, not investigate how experiences of emotions change over a long time period of one to two years.

Participants came from a range of different organisations, sectors and hierarchical levels. I used purposeful sampling and intended to use snowballing sampling but had sufficient volunteers from my personal network and through social media, where I sought participants interested in sharing how it feels to work in HR, with a minimum of two years' HR experience. I had briefly met some participants through differing connections to my university (a CIPD branch chair, alumni, a guest speaker for an HR taught module) or they were recommended to me by colleagues. Participants held roles as HR directors (2), heads of HR (1), HR managers (1), HR business partners (2) and HR advisors (5). Narrative research is suited to small samples, where the aim is gain a deep understanding of individual lives through close examination of a narrow range of rich data (Cresswell, 2013). I deliberately targeted HR generalists across a range of roles i.e. those who are primarily operational and have the closest interaction with those outside of the HR function within organisations, interacting closely with line managers and employees, rather than HR specialists in policy roles such as reward or training, because specialists typically operate within the HR function and external to organisations as centres of expertise (Ulrich, 1997). In line with qualitative research approaches, I did not attempt to generalise my results (Grix, 2010) to all HR practitioners and neither is this possible in this study design. By targeting different HR roles and levels I gained insight into the varying challenges influenced by contextual factors such as role position.

A log of participant details can be found in table 3.3 overleaf. All participant names are pseudonyms.

Table 3.3 – Participant log

Name/ Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Job title**	**Industry (Sector)**	**No. years' HR experi-ence**	**No. of photo-graphs**	**Interview duration**
Elaine	F	HR advisor	Healthcare (Not-for-profit)	4	8	1 hour 7 minutes
Anna	F	HR advisor	Education (Public)	5	10	1 hour 40 minutes
Alan	M	HR manager	Healthcare (Not-for-profit)	12	7	1 hour 4 minutes
Jack	M	HR/ER advisor	Rail (Private)	3	10	1 hour 4 minutes
Sarah	F	HR director	Professional services (Private)	18	8	55 minutes
Ruth	F	HR director	Manufact-uring (Private)	25+	10	1 hour 24 minutes
Natalie	F	HR advisor	Education (Public)	10	14	1 hour 25 minutes
Janet	F	HR advisor	Engineering (Private)	15	10	1 hour 43 minutes
Catherine	F	HR business partner	Chemicals (Private)	12	12	1 hour 38 minutes
Lorraine	F	Head of HR	Housing (Not-for-profit)	25	14	1 hour 19 minutes
Sophie	F	Senior HR business partner	Council (Public)	23	12	1 hour

Each interview lasted between approximately one and two hours with each participant presenting between 7 and14 photographs. With participants consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. I transcribed each interview in turn, noting anything striking or surprising in the transcript margins, and highlighted quotes significant to my research questions. I also recorded any emotional

responses I experienced during the interviews in my field notes, and on recalling and listening to the interviews whilst transcribing.

Discussion about photograph meaning generated rich data. I intended to interview between 8 and 12 participants. By the eleventh interview I reached data saturation, as recurring comments and experiences were shared by numerous participants, and nothing significantly new emerged in relation to my research questions (Guest, Bunch and Johnson, 2006). These recurrences included participants recounting the tensions experienced from sitting 'in the middle' of employees and managers, perceiving themselves disliked and unable to make friendships outside of HR teams which resulted in feelings of isolation and difference to those not in HR roles.

Why did I use unstructured narrative photo-interviews?

When designing the study, I intended to use interviews following the success of the pilot studies where I trialled the photo-interviews. I also considered focus groups as an alternative to individual interviews but discounted them for various reasons. First, focus groups are open to issues of group dynamics, such as the domination of certain group members, and concerns about confidentiality between participants (Robson, 2011). Second, discussing a sensitive topic such as emotions may be more difficult to express to a group of strangers from an occupational peer group than on a one-to-one basis with the researcher. In addition, there were practical challenges to bringing a disparate group of HR practitioners together from different organisations to one common time and location. My intention was to understand individual subjective experience rather than gaining a collective level of understanding through focus group discussion.

The purpose of a research interview is for the researcher to see and better understand the research topic from the participants' perspective (Fontana and Frey, 2000; King, 2004). Historically described as 'a conversation with a purpose' (Robson, 1993, p.228), interviews are more complex than this definition suggests; a statement that will be explored through this section. For example when used in narrative research, interviews encourage participants to share stories about their experiences (Tracy, 2013). Narrative interviews differ from a conversational dialogue between two speakers. In order to 'capture a full story' (Pederson, 2013, p.415) the participant takes longer turns at speech than the researcher, shifting between topics, whilst the

researcher ‘follows the participant down *their* trails’ (Riessman, 2008, p.24). This is why an unstructured interview lends itself to narrative research, as the researcher diminishes their control of the interview direction (Tracy, 2013). In using photographs as prompts, study participants narrated their accounts using the photographs they had chosen. I gently guided the conversation back to the topic of emotions if it seemed to veer off track.

By contrast, other forms of interviewing can be highly or semi-structured and by consequence more formal exchanges, characterised by a question and answer style in order to elicit valid, unbiased data (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016). What the latter fails to account for is the social and active nature of the interview (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) and naïvely assumes that participants reflect and summarise ‘reality’ by providing a mirror of their world in the interview where researchers do not influence their participants in any way (Alvesson, 2011). However, the position adopted here is that it is through the relationship between researcher and participant that knowledge is created, an active process of meaning-making (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). This stance acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and the active role they take in shaping the production of knowledge (King, 2004), requiring them to be self-reflexive about their role in the interview.

When conducting narrative interviews their purpose is to ‘elicit interviewees’ reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts’ (Bryman, 2016, p.590). I began the interview by asking participants ‘how did you get into HR?’ as a way of building rapport, settling them in to the interview and to prompt some initial stories about their experiences of HR work that I could later follow up (Tracy, 2013). For some participants this became a long, rambling account of their career history where I suggested they introduce their photographs as they referred to them. When/if participants ‘dried up’ I encouraged them to explain the next photograph. Where participants’ responses were brief (the minority) I worked harder to encourage them to open up, but using their photographs gave them a structure to follow if needed. After the opening question I asked participants to explain the photographs they had taken in any order they wished. As we did so, I laid the photographs out on the table in front of us. I noticed participants used them to prompt their narrative if they got lost or referred back to them as their stories

flowed back and forth. There was no neat start, middle and end to their narrative (Pederson, 2013). Sometimes they jumped between the photographs or grouped those together that represented similar emotions. I found some participants were great storytellers needing little prompting, others needed help (Brannen, 2013). To do so, I used generative questions defined as 'non-directive, non-threatening queries that serve to *generate* (rather than dictate) frameworks for talk' (Tracy, 2013, p.147) and probing devices such as asking for examples, clarifying timelines surrounding events and exploring motives by asking 'how do/did you feel about x?' I had no standard questions bar my introductory one and took a flexible and conversational approach where I was guided by the participants (Bryman, 2016). I would describe my interview style in line with Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing technique; an in-depth interviewing style generating trust between participant and researcher, low on confrontation, high on relationship building. I responded to dialogue, respectfully guiding question direction and content, treating participants as research partners. However, unexpectedly I found myself drawn into some participants' accounts, where sometimes I became a character in the drama they narrated and found myself engrossed in it, elsewhere I was positioned as a witness who was distant from the experience they narrated and/or someone they could talk to about the nature of the difficult work they did. It is possible participants believed I might understand about their work given my past experience and I was conscious my identity (past and present) influenced their accounts (Cassell, 2005). This is why the relationship between researcher and participant is so important to consider.

The interview relationship: being an empathic interviewer?

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee can be described as 'conversational partners' where the aim is to develop a relationship which respects the individuality and experience of the interviewee, develops trust, and acknowledges the active nature of the co-creation of knowledge during the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.7). However, in contrast to everyday conversations, interview participants are usually little known to researchers (Rubin and Rubin, 2012); which was the case in this study. The research relationship goes further in feminist approaches, which advocate a non-hierarchical relationship of openly shared views and opinions described as a 'friendship model' (Oakley, 1981, p.49). My aim was not to become or treat my participants as friends, I was mindful of

potential relational ethical concerns (Brewis, 2014; Ellis, 2007). Neither did I attempt to make the interview a neutral interaction between two parties where otherwise hidden data is uncovered (Tracy, 2013). However, I hoped to demonstrate empathy with my participants and to be an 'empathic listener' (Bennett et al., 2015). My intention in doing so was that I would collect more reliable data; data that elicited rich narrative accounts (Watson, 2009b). I also believed my background might enable participants to open up to me, that in having had experience of HR work, I would be able to understand where others might not. At some points in the interviews I briefly acknowledged where I had experienced something similar to that which participants recounted, but was careful not to influence their accounts or to try and present myself as someone with more HR competence, as Bennett et al. (2015, p.11) suggest:

> 'Empathic listening involves engaging fully with the unfolding story being recounted, but does not involve shared experience or greater knowledge'.

Active interviewing as sites of meaning making

One way that knowledge is produced in the interview is through the interaction between the researcher and participant, what Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.2) refer to as an 'inter view' or 'an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest'. However, beyond this 'inter-change' I found narratives co-created between myself and participant (Riessman, 2008) where, for example, I added lines of dialogue into their drama when brought in as a character. Pederson (2013) shares the same experience when conducting narrative interviewing with hospice patients; moments when she became part of her participant's narrative, bringing to life the concept of the co-constructed narrative. She describes being made 'welcome' into her participant's narrative, such as her name being used for the first time and being asked to 'prop up' the patient, making physical contact with her after a terse introduction to the interview context of her hospice bed room. I also noted participants using my name but to illustrate stories, such as when Catherine placed me as an employee in her narrative as she explained the importance of managers making notes as evidence of conversations with employees stating 'I spoke to Liz and she said this'. With Anna I became a character in her narrative where I joined in the dialogue creating my own lines. As Bondi (2003, p.71) suggests, empathy is 'a process in which one person

imaginatively enters the experiential world of another'. I also found laughter was used as a rapport building device by participants and myself in the interviews (Lynch, 2002).

An active interview accepts that the interview itself is an inherent part of the meaning-making process, not just an interactional exchange (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). As Holstein and Gubrium (2016, p.73) suggest:

> 'Narratives don't simply flow forth, but instead, are formulated and shaped in collaboration between the respondent and the interviewer'.

This collaboration is not simply through the words that are exchanged but also through silences, pauses, nods and gestures where 'the interviewer is a co-producer of the narrative' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.155). This position acknowledges that the researcher cannot be neutral or unbiased (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016). I bring my own assumptions and past experiences to the interview and broader research approach. The concept of reflexivity recognises that through the research process the researcher takes an active role in shaping the production of knowledge (King, 2004). I go on to discuss reflexivity where I expose my emotions at the end of this chapter. However, first I discuss the emotions that I noticed were present in the interviews.

What emotions were present in the interviews?

Before commencing the interviews I considered my ability to capture what might be privately felt rather than publicly expressed in the interview. Sturdy (2003), for example, raises epistemological concerns that emotions are unknowable. Participants were asked to recall their emotional experiences and talk to me about them, a researcher who some first met on interview day. They were given time to prepare, to think about what emotions they had experienced at work, and to represent them through a photograph. In doing this preparation they may have rationalised their past emotion experiences. However, the very act of sharing and recalling their experiences of emotion generated emotions in the interview for both participants and researcher. I noticed this as I became immersed in some participants' narratives.

Participants' emotions were made visible to me though facial expressions or expressed verbally through emotion expressing words, phrases or sounds, which I

later refer to as wordless words and sounds. Emotions were also hidden: I hid my own emotions as I did not wish to influence my participants' accounts and therefore there is the possibility that interviewees also worked to hide their emotions. None of my participants cried in the interviews, though tears were visibly close to escaping at points with some. Some interviews were full of laughter, joke-telling and irony. Others were more sombre in tone, signalling frustration and in some cases anger. One striking interview was emotion-less, where I found the participant used devices to reveal very little about herself, such as relying heavily on personal pronouns such as 'we' and 'us' in relation to HR and her organisation as collective entities when I asked her about her own feelings.

Though participants appeared to talk openly about their private emotional experiences, I noticed their difficulties in putting the complexities of emotional expression into words (Sturdy, 2003). Despite the photographs being a way of generating discussion as participants explained what the photograph meant to them (Vince and Warren, 2012), some participants appeared frustrated when trying to label their experiences. For example:

> Liz: So what was, what was the emotion that you thought you were trying to capture with that?
>
> Sarah: (Big sigh) I don't know how you, how you, what's the, is frustration an emotion? I suppose it is? Erm ... mmm
>
> Liz: Or what was the feeling?
>
> Sarah: (Pauses) (sighs)
>
> Liz: I mean, how does it feel to be in that situation?
>
> Sarah: It's annoying (laughs) yeah, I think frustration is the main one I don't really know how, how it, cos it's not a sadness or anything else …

As I typed up the transcripts, listened to the audios and re-read the transcripts I became aware of the complexity of describing emotions. The label was less important than I at first thought whilst doing the interviews.

At the end of each interview I asked participants to reflect on the photographs in front of them as a collage and to remark on anything they found striking about the set. They were asked to group photographs that represented positive experiences and those that represented negative experiences. At this point in the interview the pace of dialogue became slower. There were more pauses and silences as participants

stood back to reflect on the photographs presented in front of them, reflecting their feelings about HR work. Scarle's (2010, p.920) visual ethnographic study found the photo-interview created 'sounds of silence' where participants reflected on chosen images in contemplative moments, struggling to articulate image meanings but demonstrating 'embodied reflexive performances' surfacing deep emotions and generating deep insights. I noticed two things happen at this point in the interview. First, participants reframed their experiences more positively than they had earlier articulated. This led me to identify the narrative 'doing repair work'. Second, the emotions that had surfaced during the interview showed a calmer register. Laughter subsided. Sadness disappeared. Rationality and a professional 'face' re-emerged.

In having considered my participants' emotions present in the interviews, I next surface my reflexivity in order to highlight the process of meaning-making as I interpreted my data.

Reflexivity: The emotions of the researcher researching emotions

What is reflexivity?

The process of reflexivity can be viewed as a continual means of evaluating researcher positionality, which in turn acknowledges the impact on meaning construction (Berger, 2015). Rather than simply reflecting on research practice, reflexivity goes deeper where researchers not only question supposed truths from participants, but continually construct meaning through interactions and an unsettling of taken-for-granted assumptions (Cunliffe, 2003; Pollner, 1991).

Considering the emotional response of the researcher is a suggested part of being reflexive, questioning what is triggering particular feelings/responses to participant accounts, leading to further depth of exploration (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001). However, attention to date on how researchers deal reflexively with their emotions has been underplayed (Munkejord, 2009). Emotion has played a part in reflexivity, but has not been given adequate consideration (Burkitt, 2012; Hibbert et al., 2017; Holmes, 2010). For example, Burkitt (2012, p.458) argues that some view emotion 'as a barrier to clear reflexive thought'. Others suggest reflexivity is a way of 'managing' emotions when carrying out research (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001; Munkejord, 2009). These perspectives infer that emotions are

undesired. This is unsurprising given research methodology texts frequently trivialise or ignore researcher feelings entirely (Holmes, 2010) reducing the research process to a staged 'task' (Broussine, Watts and Clarke, 2015, p.3). Researchers, therefore, tend to neglect their own emotions, even where the topic of study is the emotions of participants themselves (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015).

By contrast, I highlight the importance of acknowledging the researcher's emotions during the research process from negotiating access, during the interviews, and as I interpreted the data. Participants' narratives elicited my emotions as their accounts evoked my past experiences as an HR practitioner. In adopting a reflexive position I noticed my emotional reactions during the interviews (noting them afterwards in my field notes) and whilst interpreting the data. I wrote vignettes exposing past experiences in my research diary which were triggered during these stages of the research process. Though I concealed my emotions during the interview in order to not influence my participants, I share them in the following discussion as they otherwise would be silenced in a taken-for-granted assumption that emotions should be dismissed. In doing so it 'opens up space for new questions, ideas and interpretations' (Blakely, 2007, p.65) where researcher and participants influence each other (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013).

Negotiating access

After the excitement of starting my PhD studies, my first disappointment came in December 2015 when:

> *I experienced a 'blow' to my proposed research, a 'kick in the stomach' feeling. I was emailed by my former employer that they would not allow me to conduct research in their organisation 'whether anonymised or not'. The formal response came from the legal team via a former peer. I was reminded of my legal obligations to confidentiality post-employment. What were they trying to hide? I felt bruised by the response realising I was now an outsider.*

Negotiating access to individual participants from a range of organisations I had not previously worked for was, by contrast, a more positive experience. I was surprised that some participants volunteered through social media; participants who were unknown to me. Others were connections through my network. Some people whom I expected would participate in my study (because of a prior working relationship) did not respond. I realised others saw me as a researcher now, not an HR practitioner. Though I had 'insider' knowledge and experience, I had become an 'outsider'.

Though I made participants aware of my HR background, I found myself positioned by participants at varying scales of 'insiderness-outsiderness' (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013) at different times during interviews with individual participants and between participants. I was conscious of these shifting boundaries as some participants opened up to me more than others, where there appeared to be a higher level of trust in me and more emotions were revealed (resulting in rich data). In these cases my perception is that my past experience led to being viewed by participants as 'one of us', someone who would understand their experiences. Yet this 'insiderness' was fluid as I and participants resituated ourselves in relation to each other (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). I discuss two excerpts from my research diary when interviewing Lorraine to illustrate:

> *Spending time in this organisation I become aware that as a researcher I am the outsider here. I have chosen to wear a more corporate-looking outfit today in order to 'fit in' than I would usually wear at university when teaching. These are clothes I wore when working in my former HR role. This decision, I now realise, is significant. I tried to position myself in the more comfortable position of my former identify of HR manager than academic researcher. I think Lorraine might open up to me more as such. We are ready to start, but I did not anticipate the need to prepare for tears. I remember I have tissues in my bag, a hangover from my former HR role where they might be required during the working day.*

I want to be seen as one of Lorraine's peers, not an outsider/researcher, as my belief is this will generate rich data. The nature of her initial dialogue with me, where she reveals she might cry due to bereavement, does not suggest she views me as an outsider. We are not total strangers, we worked together briefly as change management experts for a webinar (she as HR practitioner, myself as academic), but we are not friends who have previously discussed our personal lives. Yet as our interview progresses Lorraine positions me differently:

> *Lorraine says she sees no tangible output from HR work and tells me it must be different for me; there is a tangible output as students gain an HR qualification. Her comment at the time startled me. At that point in the interview I had been internally recalling my past HR experience, imagining we were having a conversation between two HR peers, but I was woken out of that past to the present, reminded that Lorraine positions me as a lecturer.*

In response to her comment I tell a short story from my HR past, trying to reposition myself with her as an HR peer, to remind her about my experience which has some

similarities to hers. I want to demonstrate empathy; an understanding of the difficult nature of her work.

My emotions during interviews and interpretation

During the interviews I experienced emotions such as: relief, hope, disbelief, empathy, excitement, boredom and frustration. Though participants' accounts resonated because of my past experience, I was also grateful to no longer be 'one of them'; a realisation through which I experienced relief. I felt relieved as I listened to some of their most difficult experiences and remembered these were situations I no longer had to face. Sarah recounted battles with her firm's partners and how people 'hid in cupboards' when she visited their offices. Catherine recounted being verbally attacked by the shop steward, despised by employees at the 'naughty site' and reduced to tears at the end of a difficult day. Lorraine recounted closing entire sites, attacked by her HR peers as she made them and then herself redundant. This triggered memories of my emotions when I was required to close down a business:

> *We soon met the head of HR for the Administrators. A new management team was in charge as the existing team were dispatched into redundancy and no longer required. I recall the head of HR's lack of empathy when an employee came into the HR office asking questions about redundancy payments. Her sharp-tongued mechanical responses showed no mercy and resulted in an angry 'discussion' between the two in the open plan HR office, whilst I and my team were left astounded onlookers. We became information providers – organisation charts, employee records were all handed over, lists drawn up of who was next to face redundancy. It made me feel physically sick.*

Positioning myself as an outsider was a way of distancing from my past career; one which evoked some painful memories I wanted to forget. Yet I also experienced hope, though mostly on listening to Ruth's positively framed account. She sat as an HR director on the board and described the type of HR work I had enjoyed. She told me a positive story that I wanted to believe. I wrote in my research diary that *'she made me want to go back into HR work. I left the interview feeling buoyed'.* Ruth recounted very few situations that made her uncomfortable and perceived herself 'needed' which was a feeling she seemed to crave. Her enthusiasm was contagious. My other positively experienced emotions were not in relation to HR work that participants described but where I felt we had established good rapport resulting in

rich data. For example, on interviewing Janet I felt excited that I was *'onto something'* but unsure what.

But the positive emotions were short-lived. I felt helpless as I listened to Natalie's account, where she perceived herself neglected by her boss, facing imminent redundancy. I realised it was no longer my role to help. I was not her mentor, coach or line manager. Whilst interpreting the diegetic features of her account (heavy with repetition and emphasis) my perception was that she wanted to talk to someone who would listen to her, as her boss did not. I experienced disbelief that Jack failed to acknowledge the irony of him covering for striking train conductors when he was responsible for employment relations. I felt angry at his later positive reframing of the situation because 'it's giving me exposure to this dispute environment'. I later noticed similar positive reframing by other participants and revisited it as my final narrative 'doing repair work'. My anger had pointed to something worthy of exploration.

Sophie's interview left me feeling numb from the lack of emotion in her account. I titled my notes 'a case of alexithymia?' as she appeared emotionless and someone 'looking in' on herself from a distance:

> *I came back from the interview with Sophie feeling low, that I was just going through the motions. I feel I got little from it. She did not want to open up. She talked about 'we' and 'us' and 'HR' and not 'me' and 'I'. Even when I asked her questions directed at her individually she went back to 'HR'. I could relate to what she was saying but drifted in and out of thought when listening to her, conscious of time, wanting it to end. She left me cold as she overplayed her commerciality. There is no place for emotion in HR work.*

Parts of other accounts left me feeling bored (I hear myself sighing in some of the audios) where I felt little emotion was present. For example, Alan was well defended and did not seem to want to let me in. I recorded in my research diary:

> *I hear it in my own voice when another photograph is revealed; a photograph of fire extinguishers represents rules and restrictions, a photograph of a German hat represents diversity. I sigh and sound flat in response. I note the familiar HR rhetoric expressed such as 'wanting to represent the communities that we serve', 'having to be balanced'; familiar expressions from my past experience.*

Yet my feelings of numbness, frustration and boredom where I could not find any emotion in their accounts was (I later realised) important. That there was little emotion in their accounts pointed to a deeper layer of meaning-making. For

example, that they were portraying who they thought they ought to/should be in recounting their experience of HR work to me and/or concealed emotions to protect themselves from recounting painful emotions.

As I will next explain, acknowledging my emotions became important during the data interpretation phase and influenced my work as I noticed that at times I reflexively experienced participants' narratives with them.

Data interpretation

Developing an approach

From May to July 2018 I first fully immersed myself in the data (Smith, 1995). I listened repeatedly to each of the interview audios whilst reading the transcripts and viewing the printed photographs alongside me. I produced summary documents for each participant. These included brief pen portrait biographies, summary descriptive notes of the discussion relating to each photograph, and quotes that I found pertinent to my research questions. Participant pen portraits can be viewed at appendix 5. I gave each participant a headline which summarised their narrative as a 'first cut' interpretation e.g. 'The early career HR practitioner, loving to hate her job?' I noted the sequence of participants' recounted experiences at the end of the dialogue about each individual photograph by noting broad emotion themes such as 'fun, interesting work, difficult work, empathy, bad news'. My aim was to identify any patterns to their recounted emotions but it quickly became apparent there were few identifiable sequences. Their dialogue was multi-directional and highlighted the rambling nature of personal experience. Participants shifted from experiences they framed and introduced as positive, then to negative, sometimes back to positive. Discussion about photograph meaning frequently led onto other related and unrelated experiences. At this point I first noticed emotions were infrequently labelled and seemed difficult to express. Lupton's (1998) description of emotions from her interviews also about participants' experiences of emotion began to resonate with me: their 'slipperiness'.

I catalogued all the photographs alongside the collage photograph I had taken during the interviews and noted my recalled emotional responses. I experimented by entering the transcripts into an automated word cloud programme, but found the

visual output added little to my initial observations, apart from highlighting participants' limited articulation of emotion-label words.

Realising both the richness and volume of my data at this stage, 115 photographs and written transcripts of 11 in-depth interviews, I decided to treat the photographs in the traditional interpretive approach to photo-elicitation (Meyer et al., 2013). Rather than analysing the photographs separately to the transcripts, I treated them as participant-driven prompts that elicited the rich verbal data (Harper, 2002). It became clear that the objects in the photographs were very different from what they represented for the photographer (Shortt and Warren, 2019). For this reason, content analysis of the photographs was avoided as this would abstract the image 'from the context and personal experience it represented' (Rivers, 2019, p.1570). During the write-up and following phase of interpretation from August 2018 to April 2019, I chose some of the participants' photographs to reproduce in the write-up alongside the text. These photographs were chosen as they were most relevant to the research questions and/or were a powerful visual representation of participants' emotions, extending the language available to them (Boudens, 2005). Though participants' spoken words did not contain much language about emotions, these photographs were often rich with expressions of emotions. I titled each photograph with a participant quote illustrating the meaning they attributed to them. A full photograph catalogue summary by participant and the surface-level meaning given to each can be found at appendix 6.

In August 2018, I began experimental interpretation and the write-up of one interview in detail, with Catherine, as her interview resonated with me as emotionally powerful, both in terms of the photographs and her explanation of their meaning. I jointly considered *what* she said and *how* she said it, noticing both content and features of how the narrative was delivered. In doing the latter I referred to Shotter's (2008, p.97) concept of 'gestural meaning', the 'poetic nature of utterances that arrest us or strike us' where 'meaning is created by, with, and for people in their collaborative meetings with each other' (p.2). Shotter (2008) places importance not only on the words expressed in conversations between people, but on 'spontaneously expressed, unique, bodily activities' (p. iv) where 'our utterances […] our choice of words, their pacing, intoning, their intertwining in with other activities' (p.8) gesture toward meaning. In practical terms, I considered 'poetic forms of talk' in Catherine's

account such as intonation, emphasis, rhythm, metaphors, recalled gestures such as facial expressions, pointing, and tapping the table (Cunliffe, 2002, p.135). I also noted the emotions she expressed in the interview while recounting her experience of emotion, and whether these mirrored or contradicted her remembered experience. An example was laughing and joking whilst telling a sad story. Alongside consideration of these features, I wrote up my emotional responses to her account.

I followed this process for all participants' accounts during the period of August 2018 to April 2019. My data reduction strategy was to use narrative thematic analysis to identify 'what' participants said – the content of their narratives (Maitlis, 2012). My intention, following Riessman (2008, p.53), was to 'keep a "story" intact' by identifying the common narratives across the participants' accounts (Riessman, 2002). By not breaking the narrative into codes (as is typical in Braun and Clarke's [2006] approach to thematic analysis) my aim was to identify 'the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story' (Smith, 2015, p.216). I did not use a narrative thematic analysis as the sole interpretive method as it risks resulting in a shallow form of analysis where the interpretation is merely descriptive content analysis (Chamberlain, 2000) paraphrasing what participants say into themes. However, it enabled me to reduce the large data set and make sense of participants' accounts helping me to 'see the wood from the trees' (King and Brooks, 2018, p.223).

My first cut across all participants' accounts resulted in 22 narratives (see table 3.4 overleaf). This large number was because though there were some common narratives across many participants' accounts, two participants' recounted very different experiences of their work. One was a board-level HR director – Ruth (participant 6 in table 3.4), the other an HR advisor facing redundancy – Natalie (participant 7 in table 3.4). Their individual narratives are shown in the second table below in rows 6 and 7. Though Ruth and Natalie's narratives were different, there also were some similarities with other participants so they were included in the overall interpretation.

I reduced the 22 narratives to 12 that were most frequently shown across all participants' accounts (shown in the top table in table 3.4).

Table 3.4 – 22 first cut narratives

	Expectations' to care+	HR's negative perception	Doing difficult work	Doing emotionally draining work	Mixed emotions	Being in the middle	Being in battle	Loneliness	Self AND Team care	Team Care	Concealing Emotions	Trying to be positive
1	y	y	y		y				y			y
2	y	y		y	y	y		y	y	y	y	
3		y		y	y	y			y			
4		y	y		y	y						
5	y	y		y	y	y	y	y	y		y	
6	y	y										
7	y	y		y						y	y	y
8	y	y	y				y	y	y	y	y	
9	y	y		y	y		y	y			y	y
10	y	y		y			y			y	y	
11	y	y		y	y	y		y			y	y

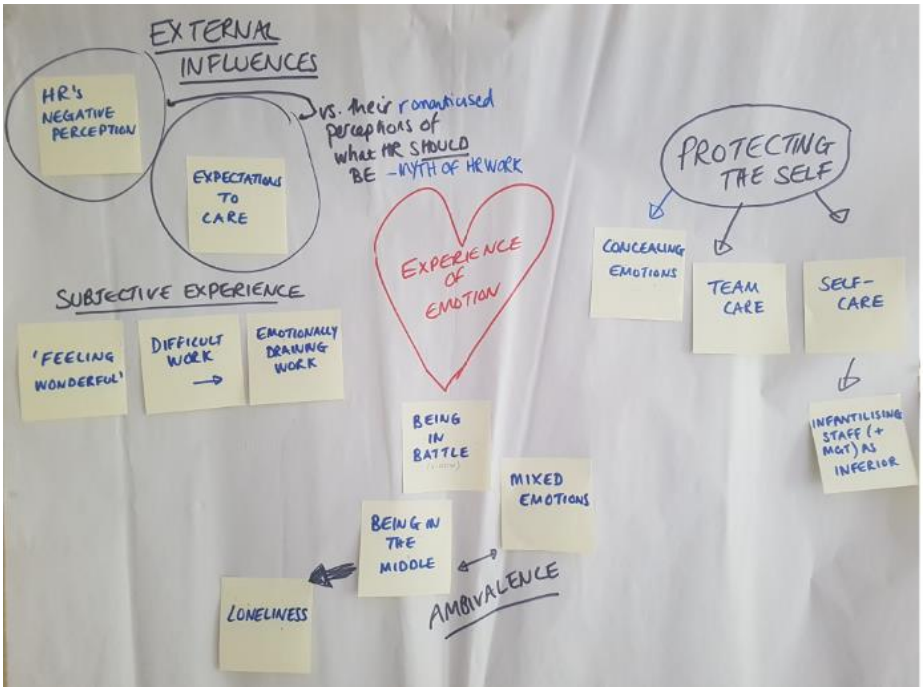
(+) might either be from self and/or from others

	Boredom	Others express-ing strong	Taking things personally	Disillusion-ment with HR	Neglected	Nostalgia for the past	Happy to be part of org team	Accepting challenging work	Feeling supported	Adapting to changing workforce
1	y									
2		y								
3		y	y							
4	y									
5										
6							y	y	y	y
7	y	y		y	y					
8						y				
9										
10										
11										

As I continued to consider the narratives that were most important to my research questions, I turned the 12 narratives into a visual mind map (see figure 3.2 overleaf) where I grouped them into four overarching narratives 1. The myth of HR work as a caring profession, 2. The subjective experience of emotionally draining work 3. Holding uncomfortable organisational positions and 4. Protecting the self.

Under each narrative sat sub-narratives. For example, within ‘the myth of HR work as a caring profession’ sat the sub-narratives ‘expectations to care’ and ‘HR’s negative perception’. After writing up a first draft of each of the four overarching narratives, I identified a fifth narrative ‘the collage - painting a positive picture’. This final narrative arose from my interpretation of the previous four, in response to the negative picture that had emerged.

Figure 3.2 Mind map of narratives



From November 2019 I entered into a second, deeper level of interpretation, where I asked myself '"What's going on here?" theoretically' (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012, p.20). The first set of narratives summarised what participants had said; at this second stage I considered what was contained in that summary, what was the bigger narrative? The narratives that I identified at this second stage were 1. No-one likes us 2. I'd hate your job 3. We're different 4. Protecting ourselves and 5. Doing repair work. As I continued to interpret and write up the findings from the interviews I realised that I often felt I was being drawn into a drama as participants narrated their experiences; a drama where I was required to play a part in it. I needed an approach to help me understand this. I therefore developed a defined approach to interpretation which goes beyond the typical approach to narrative analysis of interviews in solely focusing on the content of the narrative. I found it by considering both the mimetic and diegetic aspects of participants' narratives (terms I was introduced to in a lecture on narrative methodology) which I explain next.

Mimesis and Diegesis

The terms mimesis and diegesis are familiar terms within narratology, literary, film and theatre studies. Originating among Ancient Greek philosophers, it was Socrates who first differentiated between the two (documented in Plato's Republic and

Aristotle's Poetics) (Ryan, 2004). Critchley (2019, p.151) provides the following definition:

> 'Mimesis is a narration that proceeds by imitation, not by speaking in one's own voice, but speaking in the voice of another, as with mimicry' whereas 'diegesis is pure narration, that is, it describes events in one's own person'.

In simple terms mimesis is 'an act of showing' and diegesis is 'the verbal storytelling act of the narrator' (Ryan, 2004, p.13); what is shown, or what is told. The former mimics or represents an experience as a 'present depiction of those events', the latter reports on it as 'the past tense re-telling of events and experiences' (Peters, 2019, p.40). Typically plays, theatre, films and other dramatic arts are viewed as mimetic, novels and oral storytelling as diegetic (Fludernik, 2008). Herman and Vervaek (2019, p.14) state that 'mimesis evokes reality by staging it' and 'diegesis summarizes events and conversations'. However, they accept that such a clear cut opposition cannot be made as the two can intrude on each other, a point I later explore across different narrative modes.

On reviewing the academic literature in relation to the mimetic/diegetic narrative, I found little empirical work within organisation studies where *both* the mimetic and diegetic narrative were considered together as a framework to analyse research participants' narratives. There is also very little conceptual work with the exception of its explanation in Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje's (2004) paper. Narratives tend to be analysed using thematic and/or structural approaches which consider what is said (narrative content), or a dialogic analysis which considers 'how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative' i.e. how the narrative is performed, to whom and why (Riessman, 2008, p.105). Methodological narrative texts do not frame such approaches as mimetic or diegetic, nor do they neatly fit within them. Within organisation studies, Gaggiotti and Page (2018, p.291) used mimesis as a lens to frame their empirical work involving asking undergraduate students to analyse visual narratives of change management and recovery. Their analysis showed that students used the visual images they selected to copy/replicate the social world rather than creating 'new' narratives. An earlier study by Gaggiotti (2012) which analysed visual and oral narratives in a global organisation facing a merger and acquisition to understand synergy, used mimesis to explain how management stories and mimetic objects such as buildings, logos and brand names,

develop the ‘rhetoric of synergy’ or similarity across the organisation in different global sites. These studies, however, do not explain how to interpret the mimetic narrative (and do not consider the diegetic narrative). I therefore began to develop a rarely used approach to narrative data interpretation which considers both the diegetic and mimetic narrative together. Given the lack of methodological advice in how to do so, I explored the uses of mimesis/diegesis across different narrative modes of theatre, film and literary studies.

Traditionally drama is viewed as entirely mimetic (Richardson, 1988). For example, Peters (2019, p.40) suggests that the scenes in a play or film are ‘moments of re-enactment designed to mimetically represent the actual experience’. The audience is significant in mimesis as Shapiro (1999, p.105) states:

> ‘Like all forms of mimesis, performance events desire an audience, people who recognize the objects. Such individuals are most obviously essential in the case of symbolic events because of the role they play as interpreters […]. The audience is the occasion for the mimesis, its raison d’être, and once they recognize the object of the performance event, the mimesis is complete’.

In mimesis, therefore, the audience makes a representational connection to what is shown in front of them in that moment; a way of making sense of what is represented to them. In drama the audience is invited to accept the represented world as if it were real (Herman and Vervaek, 2019). Yet whether a drama is effective depends on ‘the intensity with which a player executes an event measured against the degree of recognition it triggers’ (Shapiro, 1999, p.106). In other words, what is represented must be recognisable to the audience in order for them to accept what they see being played out in front of them.

Drama, however, is not purely mimetic. Mimesis and diegesis overlap when prologues, epilogues and other examples of stage narration bring diegetic elements into mimetic drama, where a narrator may speak to the audience and give an opinion on the action being played out in front of them (Richardson, 1988). These diegetic ‘moments of summary’ (Herman and Vervaek, 2019, p.15) reveal to the audience that what they are watching is not real. In diegesis the narrator verbally describes a scene/events and through doing so they place images in the minds of the audience (Bryant-Bertail, 1986). As Lorek-Jezinska (2017, p.358) states in relation to theatre:

> ‘Leaving the stories at the level of narration without visual concretization in stage events and images creates space for further individualization and personalization of stories in the viewers’ imagination’.

Therefore a diegetic mode of narration, where a narrator explains/reports on the action, means the audience has to work harder and use their imagination more than in mimetic narration where it is shown in front of them. If the diegetic narration is effective it might draw the audience into the performance, for example, as they use their imaginations they may become active participants in the performance where, although they remain seated, they project themselves from their seats to the stage or screen. This is similar to the theory of haptic visuality used in film to refer to how the film evokes the audiences’ senses, immersing them in what is shown on the screen in front of them (Marks, 2000). However, the use of the terms in film presents an alternative understanding to what I have explained so far.

Diegesis has an entirely different meaning in film and is generally used as a term in relation to sound. Mimesis remains at the level of what is represented through the images on the cinema screen. Diegetic sound refers to the sounds heard by the characters in the ‘story world’ such as their dialogue, sounds of nature, traffic sounds and so forth. However non-diegetic sound refers to the sounds outside the ‘story world’ heard only by the film viewers and not the story characters, such as a voiceover, background music or soundtrack (Watts, 2007). Dykhoff (2012, p.170) states that:

> ‘If the audience interprets a sound as diegetic, they will understand the characters’ actions in relation to the soundscape that surrounds them. If they interpret it as non-diegetic, they will consider it as information from the filmmaker directly to them’.

Knight-Hill (2019, p.661) suggests that both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are used to ‘convey meaning’ and ‘suggest particular interpretations’. In other words, the filmmaker uses them together to generate a particular response or emotion from the viewer.

When there is no physical visual presentation of a narrative, as in novels which are typically classified as diegetic, the visual is what is imagined by the reader. That is, the diegetic in novels refers to the invitation to readers to use their imaginations. In literary studies, diegesis is defined as ‘a technical literary term for the fictional “world” of events narrated’ (Van Peer and Chatman, 2001, p.357). Mackey (2003) argues

that readers have 'the potential to become engrossed in a contract of make-believe'. The reader of a novel may become engrossed in the story, but as Lorek-Jezinska (2017) states above, whether the audience, or in this case the reader, is 'engrossed' depends on their own imagination and in the ways in which the story is told. This can depend on the narrator's distance and involvement in the narrative. For example, at one extreme a narrator can be non-diegetic, where they are not present in the story that is being told, or alternatively they could be auto-diegetic where they are a major character in it (Milostivaya, 2018). However, a novel can enter a mimetic mode of narration where characters voices are written in direct speech, and the narrator's voice disappears (Ryan, 2004).

In summary, though these various narrative modes demonstrate differing interpretations of the two terms and there is no sure boundary between them, my reading leads me to defining them as follows in table 3.5 below.

Table 3.5 Mimetic and diegetic narrative features

Mimetic Narrative Features	**Diegetic Narrative Features**
Showing (re-presents) The narrative content of *what* is said/represented	Telling (narration) *How* the narrative is told, by who and where - the performance
The narrative mimics 'reality' (both words and visual) Plays, theatre, films, dance and visual images (photographs, collages, paintings). The viewer does not need to use much imagination as narrative meaning is shown to them	The performance conveys meaning The narrator might vary their pitch/intonation, use emphasis, sounds and play the part of different characters to bring the narrative to life Novels, poems and everyday conversations which require the audience/reader to use their imagination
Representational connection The audience/viewer recognises what is presented in front of them as 'real' The representation is recognisable and the audience is a witness to what is shown	The performance helps the audience understand what is happening The performance may have an effect on the audience (depending on the position of the narrator) If the performance is strong the audience may be drawn into the narrative as an active participant/co-actor

This discussion might seem far removed from the narratives constructed by participants in a research interview. In particular the drama of the mimetic narrative enacted on the theatre stage or cinema screen does not appear to befit a one-to-one interview between participant and researcher in a private interview room. However, in an interview the words participants use can be argued to be mimetic, as they are a way of trying to describe or to re-present the thing/object/experience participants are 'mimicking'. During the interview participants describe their experiences to an audience (the researcher) who takes that to be their reality and imagines what that reality must be like. This enabled me to identify what participants' narratives were about and to 'establish the link between the content of stories (narrative properties) and organizational issues' (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje, 2004, p.265). It enabled me to interpret their accounts, to connect to and make sense of it in relation to their experiences of HR work. In mimesis I witnessed participants' accounts as they represented their experiences of HR work to me. I witnessed their accounts in 'receptive mode' where I 'play no active role in the events presented by the narrative' (Ryan, 2004, p.14).

Participants' photographs also represented their experiences of emotions. Artistic representation is a form of mimesis; photographs being one example alongside paintings, poetry, sculpture and so forth (Walton, 1990). I asked my participants to take photographs that represented their experiences of emotion. Some photographs seemed to mimic experienced emotions that participants struggled to put into words, (such as a drawing Anna photographed of her screaming face); others were more representational in nature such as photographs of objects that represented emotions (such as Elaine's photograph of a boiling kettle representing anger). In addition, the act of showing and viewing the photographs together in the interview generated various emotional responses. Walden (2010, p.36) suggests photographs can lead to 'reflexive mimesis, a conscious experience of emotional participation on the part of the viewer'. The viewer in this case was both the participant who had chosen the image and myself as we viewed their photographs together in the interview. Though I cannot know the emotional experiences of my participants apart from what they chose to express during the interview (and even then the words available to them may be inadequate to describe their emotions), in the interview their diegetic

narrative helped me better understand the experiences represented through the photographs as they verbally explained photographic meaning.

As I proceeded with my interpretation of participants' narratives, I began to notice that there were points during some of their accounts where I became drawn into them as a co-actor in a drama that they narrated to me. I noted how participants told and performed their narrative where, for example, some participants adopted the voices of different characters as if they were performing in a mini-drama within the interview. Some participants turned parts of their narrative accounts into a comedy or a tragedy. For example, Catherine joked about and presented a black comedy where she made light of the requirement to dismiss an employee and brought in another character (her friend) to join in her comedic performance. I found myself laughing along with her, drawn into her drama as a character in it. This was how her diegetic narrative had an effect on me. It was not something I deliberately or consciously decided to do. I also noticed some participants made wordless sounds which mimicked objects or their experiences (for example, an alarm/claxon sounding on the factory floor). Where I found myself living a participant's drama with them I reflexively experienced their narrative as a fellow HR practitioner and sometimes added my own lines. I was in 'participatory mode' where 'the recipient becomes an active character in the story' (Ryan, 2004, p.14). However, participants' diegetic narrative varied depending on where they positioned themselves as narrator in relation to me. Some performed their narrative where they were a main character in it (auto-diegetic), whereas others presented themselves as someone who had nothing to do with their narrative (non-diegetic) where they are a witness to it (Milostivaya, 2018). When I was in 'receptive mode', and also witnessing their account rather than being a co-actor in it, I tended to experience their narrative as an academic researcher.

During my write-up period from April to September 2019 I began by separating out the mimetic from the diegetic elements of participants' narratives. I did so because it enabled me to differentiate between the two as I developed my approach. In considering the mimetic and diegetic features of participants' narrative accounts I asked questions such as; what is the narrative about/what is the story being represented (mimetic)? Could I make a representational connection to what participants were saying (mimetic)? What were the photographs representative of (mimetic)? How did participants tell their accounts in the interview (diegetic)? For

example, did they use gestural features to convey meaning such as varying their pace and tone of speech, sighing, eye rolling, clicking fingers, banging the desk and other gestural features (Shotter, 2008) and how did these features help me better understand their narrative (diegetic)? Did their narrative draw me in to experience it with them, helping me understand/convey meaning about their experience (diegetic)? Did they perform the parts of other characters in their narrative and through their performance draw me in where I participated with them (diegetic)? Or did they position me as a witness to their accounts (mimetic)? I also explored how/if participants' recounted emotions connected to the emotions they enacted in the interview. Did the emotions they recounted match those they expressed/performed in the interview or were they different (combining the mimetic representation of the emotions they described and the diegetic performance of them in the interview)?

Having separated out the mimetic and diegetic elements of participants' narratives in the first write up of my findings chapter, I realised that such a separation limited my interpretation and led to some duplication. However, doing this was a necessary stage enabling me to refine my work and deepen my interpretation of participants' narratives. In the following two findings chapters I bring mimesis and diegesis together in each of the five narratives I identified across participants' accounts. In doing so, I demonstrate participants' 'boundary crossing' (Mackey, 2003) and the overlaps between the mimetic/diegetic features of their narratives.

Table 3.6 (see overleaf) summarises my original work on how mimesis and diegesis relates to research interviews which I used to support data interpretation. The information in table 3.6 combines the first summary in table 3.5 with additional points relevant to research interviews shown in italics.

In summary, to clarify the distinction between mimesis and diegesis for the purposes of this study, a defining feature is the effect of the narrative on the audience; in this case, the researcher. In mimesis I connected to what participants said/showed me; it was recognisable to me and made sense in relation to their experiences of HR work. In mimesis I experienced emotions as participants told me about their experiences. For example, one participant (Sophie) exemplified a mimetic narrative during her interview. I could connect to what she said about her experiences of HR work, but there was little performance in her narrative. She did not perform emotion in the

Table 3.6: Mimesis and diegesis related to research interviews

Mimetic Narrative Features	**Diegetic Narrative Features**
Showing (re-presents) The narrative content of what is said/represented *What interviewees say in the interview in relation to the research topic*	Telling (narration) How the narrative is told, by who and where - the performance *How interviewees perform their narrative in the interview in interaction with the researcher*
The narrative mimics 'reality' (both words and visual) The viewer does not need to use much imagination as narrative meaning is shown to them *The photographs participants show and the words spoken in the interview represent the experiences participants are mimicking*	The performance conveys meaning. The narrator might vary their pitch/intonation, use emphasis, sounds, play different characters, to bring the narrative to life Requires the audience/reader to use their imagination *Interviewees may perform a mini-drama in the interview e.g. a comedy or tragedy, play different people's experiences adopting different characters' voices* *These gestural features help the researcher imagine what the interviewee's experience is like*
Representational connection *The researcher interprets the interviewees words and images in accordance with the issues surrounding the research topic (their experiences of emotions in their working lives)* The audience/viewer recognises what is presented in front of them as 'real' The representation is recognisable and the audience is a witness to what is shown *The researcher can connect to what is being said and the interviewee's account makes sense to the researcher* *The researcher experiences emotions as they listen to participants' accounts*	The performance helps the audience understand what is happening The performance may have an effect on the audience (depending on the position of the narrator/their distance from the narrative). If the performance is strong the audience may be drawn into the narrative as an active participant/co-actor *The researcher may become engrossed in the narrative (e.g. the researcher may lose track of time/the sense that they are in an interview)* *The researcher may become a character in the drama the interviewee is performing. In the interview this may mean the researcher participates by co-constructing the narrative/adding their own lines and/or expressing emotion*

interview. I was not drawn into/or engrossed in what she said but it still resonated with me. I experienced her narrative as an academic researcher (experiencing differing emotions which I concealed) and I felt she positioned me as such. By contrast, Catherine 'told a good story' and I noted that the interview felt like a performance (it often seemed as if she was performing stand-up comedy). In diegesis I frequently became engrossed in her account to the extent that I became a character in the mini-drama she narrated. I experienced and expressed emotions as I became drawn into her narrative. She performed emotions in the interview (sometimes the emotions matched her description and sometimes they differed, as when she made a sad experience seem funny). I reflexively experienced her narrative as a fellow HR practitioner who was in conversation with her and left my seat in the interview room to experience it with her. However, as my findings will illustrate, participants switched between the modes at different points in the interviews.

The final sub-sections of this chapter set out how I evaluated my research approach and addressed any ethical issues.

Evaluating research

Qualitative and quantitative research cannot be evaluated in the same way due to their differing ontological and epistemological positioning. Cunliffe's (2011, p.648) three knowledge problematics, intersubjective, subjective and objective, demonstrate the plurality of research choices and underpinning ontological and epistemological assumptions. Evaluation of qualitative methods, therefore, uses different criteria from quantitative methods.

Quantitative research is evaluated against generally accepted standards within a positivist paradigm acknowledging an external reality independent from subjects that can be tested scientifically. It seeks objectivity, is concerned with bias, reliability to replicate the study, and generalizability to larger populations (Tracy, 2013). Validity is evaluated through 'construct validity' where chosen tests should effectively measure phenomenon, 'internal validity' concerning causal relationships between phenomena, and 'external validity' attempting to generalise to broader populations (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Given the different philosophical positions, these criteria do not translate as suitable measures of qualitative research and from a subjectivist positioning,

objectivity is unattainable as researchers cannot take a value-free position on their view of the world (Burr, 2015); a position assumed in this study.

In terms of qualitative research, there is no universally accepted definition of high-quality (Cassell et al., 2009). Over 30 years ago, Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggested measures of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability; though these criteria were seen to parallel quantitative measures and were superseded by more diverse evaluation approaches (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2008). For example, Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) offer three criteria for ethnographic research: 'authenticity' to convince the reader the researcher studied in the field, 'plausibility' as to whether what is studied seems legitimate, and 'criticality' whereby readers' taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged. Alternatively, Tracy (2010) proposes a general list of eight 'big tent' criteria of 'worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, meaningful contribution and ethical'. Though some argue these criteria are too general against varying underlying epistemological concerns of researchers (Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018), for the purposes of this thesis this is a useful framework for developing the craft of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). I evaluated this study against each criterion, shown in table 3.7.

Table 3.7 - Application of Tracy's 'Big Tent' criteria

Big Tent Criteria	**How did I address these criteria in this study?**
Worthy topic Relevant, timely, significant interesting	• Empirical studies of how HR practitioners do their work are limited • Emotion in organisations is a growing area of interest in research but scarcely explored within HR work • Emotions are an enduring feature of organisational life as researchers continue to argue that organisations are not unemotional sites
Rich rigor (how well is the methods section written)	• My research questions are in line with subjectivist and interpretivist positioning • Detailed explanation of the narrative methodology, methods of data collection and interpretation are provided earlier in this chapter
Sincerity	• I included my reflexivity in the methodology chapter and exposed it during data interpretation and in the

	write-up
Credibility	• There is a high use of participant quotes and relevant participant photographs included in the findings • Study findings are contrasted with other studies from the literature review in the discussion
Resonance	• Evocative language is highlighted through use of participant quotes • The use of images reproduced in the thesis intend to demonstrate resonance with the reader with their own workplace experiences (even if they are in a different job role)
Significant Contribution	Theoretical contribution • The development of a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work Methodological contribution • The development of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis
Ethical	• Ethical approval was granted before commencing data collection • Acknowledgement that ethnography and participant observation are not suitable due to the sensitivity of HR work • No situational ethical issues occurred during the course of the study • Relational ethical issues were minimised by involvement of participants who have limited prior relationship with the researcher
Meaningful coherence	• Connected to the literature in a meaningful way • Maintained subjectivist positioning in research design e.g. participants asked to take photographs rather than the researcher. The experience of emotions was explored through subjective experience, contextualised and situational in relation to others, rather than categorising and objectifying emotion.

Research ethics

Tracy (2010) categorises qualitative research ethics into three categories: procedural, which encompass institutional regulations and requirements; situational, which consider the context of the study; and relational, which consider the relationship between researcher and participant. These considerations should be maintained throughout the duration of the study, not purely when seeking ethical approval before data collection begins (Tracy, 2010). Discussion of each of these categories in relation to this study follows, with additional consideration given to ethics in visual research.

Procedural ethics

Soobrayan (2003, p.108) argues that ethical research issues are driven by contextual factors rather than by one 'single set of rules of practices'. Those who critique formal ethical procedures highlight situational ethical issues which occur during the course of research as evidence of the shortcomings of formal ethical codes (Jeanes, 2017). However, most ethical principles and codes are underpinned by utilitarian or deontological theories. Utilitarian theories are concerned with the consequences of ethical decisions and deontological theories consider rights, duties and agreed codes of conduct (Richardson and McMullan, 2007). Research ethics principles generally require researchers to consider non-maleficence, gaining informed participant consent, not deceiving participants about genuine study aims, and maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality (Jeanes, 2017). The University of Bath code of ethics was adhered to and ethics approval granted prior to data collection. Participants were volunteers who had the right to withdraw at any point during the study. As HR practitioners the participants are not classed as vulnerable. However, I used my extensive prior experience working in organisations in management and HR roles to carefully handle a potentially sensitive topic. The interviews progressed at a pace that suited the participants and I demonstrated empathy with my participants. Emotions were present in the interview when participants talked about their emotions but I did not view this problematic; a methodological contribution of this study is that emotions in interviews should be acknowledged, observed and interpreted.

All data was anonymised and securely stored on my personal university network drive, accessible only by myself. A participant information sheet (appendix 3) and consent form (appendix 4) were provided to all participants demonstrating adherence to the university's code of ethics. Ethical approval for the full study was granted on 1st December 2017 by the PhD director of studies at the University of Bath.

Ethics in visual research

In addition to the general principles of ethical research, additional considerations need to be made when using visual research methods. Questions are raised in relation to consent and anonymity, legislative issues and copyright (see for example: Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015; Rose, 2016; Wiles et al., 2008; Wiles, Clark and Prosser, 2011). I next outline how I addressed the various issues relating to legislation and copyright, consent and anonymity.

Legislation and copyright

Photographs are owned by the person who takes the image, making them the copyright owners, therefore researchers need to gain their consent to publish them in their research (Rose, 2016). This is a straightforward process whereby copyright of the image can be transferred to the researcher with participant consent (Wiles et al., 2008). To avoid future potential issues on subsequent publication of photographs, Pink (2013) suggests agreements on ownership and usage should be made with participants early in the study. My study consent forms stated that participants own their photographs and they were asked to give consent for them to be published. Participants were asked to upload the photographs from their smartphones to online secure storage folders, where access was only be available between individual participant and researcher. These images were then deleted and securely stored on my university network drive and anonymised with participant numbers in separate folders.

Consent and anonymity

Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) suggest the practice of uploading photographs onto social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat is a socially accepted norm today. Therefore, asking research participants to complete consent forms to use their photographs creates potential barriers between researcher and participant.

This is because what would otherwise appear mundane is escalated through formalisation of the consent form. However, consent is needed both from study participants who take the photographs and also from people captured in photographs, so they can obscure their identity if they wish (Warren, 2018). Practically, this raises further questions such as whether verbal or written consent is sufficient for those who may be unknowingly caught on camera. Rose (2016) argues that as UK law permits photographs to be taken in public, even of private places, legal consent of people photographed is not needed. This is a debated topic amongst visual scholars, though Wiles et al.'s (2008) advice appears sensible, suggesting researchers brief participants that where other people are captured they ask for permission whilst explaining why they are taking photographs. My participant instructions followed Wiles et al.'s (2008) advice and to further protect organisational anonymity stated participants should not photograph any objects which make their organisation identifiable.

In further considering anonymity, some researchers blur faces or pixilate distinguishing features when reproducing digital photographs, protecting confidentiality or as directed by ethical committees (Allen, 2015). This is more commonplace in medical research or where images of children are used, though Wiles et al. (2008) highlight a number of issues within social research such as objectifying people captured in the image and impacting the viewer's ability to interpret the whole image. The overall integrity of visual research is challenged where such practices are used, though Allen (2015) reluctantly concedes that an anonymised image is better than no image in the final publication. However, I did not expect participants to take photographs of themselves (three did). They took 'selfies', asked a colleague to photograph them, and/or included images of themselves from their photograph album. These photographs were not published as doing so would breach participant anonymity but were described in the write-up where relevant to illustrate participants' narratives. Images which participants downloaded from the internet through their smartphones and made into photographs were only presented in the study if copyright permitted. Where this was not the case those photographs were described in the write-up.

Situational ethics

Given the research topic, I have already argued against the suitability of an ethnographic approach due to the sensitive nature of HR work. Also, given I did not take a case study approach, interviews only took place in participants' organisations if they so wished. Therefore, this appears to place less importance on situational ethics but more importance on relational ethics in the context of the interview which will next be explained.

Relational ethics

Researchers demonstrate relational ethics by considering the role they play in creating a relationship of mutual respect with participants (Ellis, 2007), treating them as human beings rather than research subjects (Tracy, 2010). Having a 'shared community membership' can both help and hinder the research (Platt, 1981 p.78). In this study, the relationship I had with participants where they were aware I had held an HR role in the past was fundamental to my mimetic/diegetic narrative interpretation. With most participants my past experience enabled good rapport between us during the interviews, where the interview became mimetic of their workplace experience (where they gossiped, joked and 'let off steam' with other HR practitioners in private spaces). At times I was drawn into their narrative where I became a fellow HR practitioner in the interview with them. However, I also shifted positions when, for example, at the end of the interviews I was repositioned as an academic researcher as participants re-narrated their experiences to me in a more positive light than what they had earlier presented (something I discuss in chapter five in relation to the narrative 'doing repair work'). I interpreted both how participants first presented themselves and interpreted the repair work they later did, which enabled me to better understand their experiences. I surfaced my reflexivity through data interpretation and in my write-up, where I openly placed myself and my own emotions into the research. In summary, any potential ethical issues were addressed during the course of the study.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how I have researched emotion from a narrative perspective, justified the methodological approach taken, and shown how this is consistent with my subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological positioning. In the following two chapters I present my findings.

Chapter 4 - Findings (1): How does it feel to work in HR?

In this and the following chapter I present and discuss the findings from my interpretation of the mimetic and diegetic narrative across participants' accounts. This chapter encompasses three narratives: 'no-one likes us', 'I'd hate your job' and 'we're different'. These narratives illuminate participants' subjective experiences of their work; how it feels to work in HR. Chapter five encompasses two narratives: 'protecting ourselves' and 'doing repair work'. These narratives highlight how participants navigated their experiences of emotionally demanding work. In both chapters I draw attention to the mimetic and diegetic features of participants' narratives and my position in the narrative; either as a witness to it (mimetic), or engrossed in it as a co-actor. In presenting these findings I use a combination of participant quotes from across participants' accounts which provide rich illustration each narrative, and also present longer excerpts of individual participants' accounts which illustrate the mimetic/diegetic features of their narrative.

'No-one likes us'

I begin this section by presenting the narrative 'no-one likes us' which I identified across all participants' accounts. This narrative is important to the research question 'what experiences generate emotions in HR work?' In the opening section I use examples from different participants' accounts to illustrate this commonly held perception. I then present the narratives of two participants as fuller accounts, Catherine and Lorraine, as they provide rich illustration of this narrative and presented evocative characterisations in the interview. In doing so, I draw attention to the mimetic and diegetic features of their narratives. I conclude by presenting the impact of feeling disliked from across multiple participant accounts – feeling lonely and having few workplace friends.

Participants expressed a variety of perceptions about HR work. For example, perceptions that they were entering a caring profession:

> I went into HR because I liked people, and I'm very caring (Janet).
>
> I think that was one of the things where I wanted to do it (HR) is, like giving people advice and helping them and trying to help them overcome an issue or work through something, that was one of the reasons that I wanted to get in HR (Anna).

In contrast with participants who did not believe the HR profession (or themselves) to be caring:

> Things like working with people and HR always came out (of an online careers test at university), but as did things like nursing, and that sort of working with people and that, and I'm not that caring … of anything, although I'm sure nurses probably think they're not caring, in the same way that people think HR is a bit of tea and sympathy and actually it's not, is it? (laughing) (Lorraine).

> I think a lot of people get into HR because they're quite compassionate, and quite caring because it's kind of a caring business profession in one respect, because you're dealing with people … Erm … I mean, I wouldn't say I'm particularly, I don't particularly like people per se, but I, I quite enjoy working with people. You realise when you get into it (HR) you actually have to be quite hard about things (Alan).

However, those who believed they had entered a caring profession soon found themselves disillusioned:

> My experience of HR, once I had qualified, was that you don't necessarily find people who care about other people, you get extremely transactional people, and it's a bit shocking really sometimes (Janet).

> We're trying to help you to address and overcome an issue, provide advice to you and what you actually get back is like 'this is your fault, why are you doing this to me?' […] I think it is quite it is a blame thing (Anna).

What was common across all participants' accounts was that they felt themselves to be widely disliked. Note their adoption of colleagues' voices as they describe how they feel they are seen by others:

> 'Euch, its them HR people', which is, you know, I worked at (company name) and they used to call us er 'human remains!'(Ruth).

> I remember years ago, erm somebody saying to me 'oh people go to work in HR cos they basically can't do anything else', you know, which you, you may well find, you know, maybe a common view sort of thing. When somebody says that to you, you're sort of thinking 'ok, that's not exactly encouraging is it?' (Sophie).

> People like to blame HR for anything. Erm, cos it's just an easy, it's not a person is it, it's just a 'ah HR said you gotta do this' whereas a lot of managers actually use that as well if they don't wanna be in the firing line they'll just say 'ah look I'm sorry, HR have said I've gotta, I've gotta do this' (Jack).

> HR arrive and people go 'ooooooohhhhhhhwww' … they clam up (Catherine).

Sarah reported that:

> If I go down to London office now everyone hides in cupboards because they think I'm coming for somebody.

While Lorraine recounted:

> There have been lots of times that you just know you're not popular in HR. Right from 'oh look it's you again, I know what you've, you've come to close the business down again haven't you?' And you sort of, and you do have a relationship with people, and you are human, and it is hard, and you do walk in smiling going 'hi … yeah I have (apologetic laughter) sorry'.

They felt unwelcome and distrusted. Anna, for example, who shared an office with administrative staff, said:

> So it's *very* difficult to be in that environment I think where … you're being questioned on what you do all the time and where you go and you're being watched, definitely being watched, but also erm to, to, its awkward cos they're obviously privy to stuff that they actually should not be privy to.

The feelings were sometimes mutual, as Janet reports:

> When I left things in an evening in my room […] I knew things had been rifled, and I knew at some meetings that I were invited to that people knew things that the only way they could have known it was look through my electronic files, so I started putting, password protecting, and then it wasn't long after that I was made redundant.

Whereas Catherine reported that the trade union shop steward openly expressed his dislike towards her:

> I'm an easy target, I don't sit on site. I'm classed as corporate, head office again. So I'm, I don't have feelings as far as they're concerned […]. He'd (shop steward) literally in a face-to-face meeting has sat there and said 'I'm not threatening you but, if me and the other union rep decide that we can't work with you this company's got a big issue on its hands' […]. The first day I was there this same guy said er 'so how long do you think you're gonna last then?' […] They do it to try and rattle you.

That they felt alienated from colleagues is encapsulated in Sarah's account of how colleagues feel HR are 'compliance police' (Sandholtz and Burrows, 2016).

> People will also watch what they say about you a lot, if you're out on a work's night out or whatever, and you know, people will always say 'oh, be careful HR are here' you know 'don't say anything that's un-p.c. or whatever else'. It's very hard to sort of not dispel that myth and therefore become approachable.

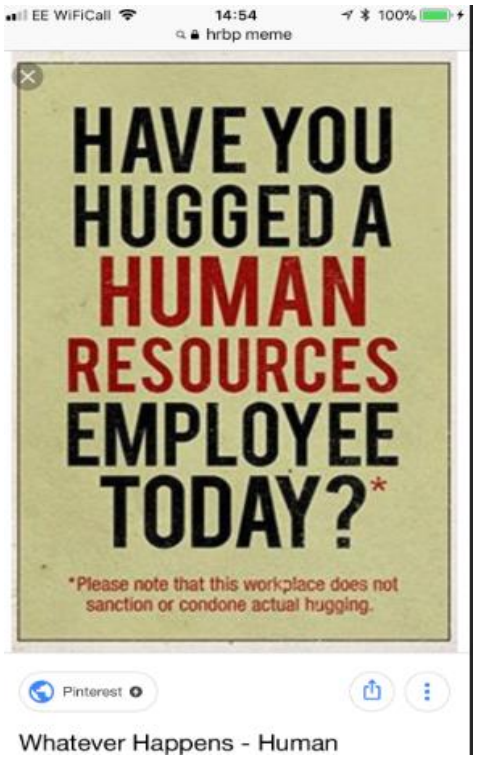
It is not surprising, therefore, that Anna reports 'I'm not enjoying it. It's making it an unpleasant place to work', so much so that in one organisation at least attempts were made to improve the image of the HR department through renaming it:

I think they wanted to call it (HR) 'workforce' so that it sounded a bit more … I suppose supportive rather than HR. Cos people see HR as the bad people don't they sometimes? (Elaine).

Feelings of being perceived as uncaring, disliked, mistrusted and unapproachable are encapsulated in Catherine's sharing of the visual slogan in photograph 4.1 which she chose because:

Photograph 4.1 – 'I just thought this was funny cos nobody does, do they?'

(Pinterest, 2020a)



Catherine: Erm, yeah I just thought this one 'have you hugged a human resources employee' I just thought this was funny, cos nobody does do they? (laughing)

Liz: No (laughing)

Catherine: Nobody hugs a HR person

Liz: It's brilliant

Catherine: Nobody comes up and goes 'awww, really nice to see you Catherine, really glad you're here'. You usually turn up and they go 'can you come in this office really quickly' (sighs) and you go 'yes alright, I've only been driving for three hours its fine' (sighs) but I thought that was quite funny. (Reads from image) 'Please note that this workplace does not sanction or condone actual hugging'.

The humour in this slogan 'facilitates the expression of the absurd' (Sandberg and Tutenges, 2019, p.2); the 'absurd' here being the notion that HR staff are 'huggable'. When a different participant, Natalie, *is* hugged by an employee she states:

> I actually got a hug from somebody yesterday after a meeting and I was so, I was a bit, shell-shocked cos I'm not used to it and I said 'I'm just doing my job' and she's like 'oh I know but you were so, so supportive and you were so nice' and she gave me a hug and I almost felt like, not uncomfortable, but I wasn't expecting it and […] because we, I think people just presume that, we, we are just, we're only there for the doom and gloom and the negative.

However, the emotions participants expressed when recounting their experiences of feeling disliked did not always mirror what they said. I explore Catherine's account in detail next as it provides rich illustration of this narrative and shows her use of humour in relation to feeling disliked. I also draw attention to the mimetic and diegetic features of her narrative.

Catherine – making light of being a 'hatchet person'

Catherine tells a good story. I enjoy listening to her and find myself drawn into her telling of it; the effect of her diegetic narrative. Emotions are present when she talks about emotion, but they do not always mirror the emotion she recounts. Humour is the dominant emotion she uses to tell a narrative where what she says should not be funny, as she describes HR work where she is required to dismiss staff. Humour enabled the expression of difficult emotional experiences at some point across all participants' accounts (though featured more strongly in some than others). It can be used in many different ways other than an expression of something that is experienced as funny. For example, in building and maintaining relationships by demonstrating 'affiliation, friendliness or even intimacy' (Glenn, 2003, p.1), to distance oneself from, cope with and 'neutralise' harmful emotions, making day-to-day work experiences appear less threatening or stressful (Hatch, 1997; Wijewardena, Härtel and Samaratunge, 2010; Wijewardena et al., 2016) and to enable the expression of ambiguity/contradictions (Sandberg and Tutenges, 2019). In actively using humour during her interview in interaction with me, Catherine evoked emotion from her audience. As Glen (2003, p.52) states 'laughter is fundamentally social'.

Humour is introduced early into Catherine's account as she shares how she began her HR career, doing employee relations case work as a line manager. From my

experience, employee relations cases tend to be issues such as disciplinaries, poor performance issues, bullying/harassment or absence management cases, though Catherine does not provide the details. There is a shared understanding between us and she does not need to explain. She gently giggles, lowers her voice and says quietly that she 'got a reputation for being quite good at it' then jokes that she got more cases until 'you're doing all of them' and breaks out in full laughter. I joke back, laughing as I say 'that's what happens when you get good at something' and she replies 'yeah (laughs) victim of your own success'.

These few statements are full of emotion. The possible embarrassment expressed by being renowned for being 'quite good' at doing bad work (disciplinaries) as she says the words in a giggling, soft voice, or alternatively the modesty expressed though humour in a self-deprecating way, where she tries to underplay this recognition of doing 'bad' work well as an achievement. Her first full laugh appears to be an invitation for me to respond with laughter, testing out my reaction. My laughter in response accepts her invitation to bring humour into our dialogue (Glenn, 2003). I do not judge her for doing 'bad' work well. Here 'notions like "nervous" or "polite" laughter point to its doing other interactional work than simply expressing emotion' (Glenn, 2003, p.162). Humour is a way of building rapport between strangers where, for example, they encounter new situations so people can 'negotiate an understanding of their relationships and environment' (Lynch, 2002, p.432). In one short exchange between us involving humour, similarities are established and I make Catherine aware she will not be judged harshly by me. As I laugh along with her she is free to continue to use humour through her account. I recollect feeling relaxed despite having only just met her. Her humour is reassuring and a way of us maintaining developing rapport to 'break the ice' (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). I anticipate this will be a 'good' interview that will elicit rich data and 'settle in' for what is to follow.

As the interview progresses I realise I do not have to work hard to encourage Catherine to share her views and opinions. Our conversation flows easily and direction is guided by the photographs. She describes some of her photographs as 'a little bit jokey, that's kind of my way'. However, humour is broken up with more serious accounts such as when she explains the emotions experienced from doing difficult HR work early in her career. I note her use of sounds for dramatic effect

within her narrative. She explains how she transitioned from learning and development into HR work, by doing tasks for the HR business partners:

> I then got put into a troubleshooting role. So my role was to utilise both parts of my experience, go into underperforming teams and either manage them up or out, depending on what needed to happen, which was fine for sort of a year and a bit that I did that, but then all of sudden somebody said 'Catherine is going to be your ops manager', and they go 'guhhhhhhhhhhherrrrrrr'. It got to the point where it wasn't a particular nice work environment cos you were seen as a bit of a hatchet person. So then people start keeping you at arm's length.

Catherine perceives herself disliked to the extent that an alarm sounds to warn employees of her arrival. The wordless sound she makes in the interview 'guhhhhhhhhhhherrrrrrr' is reminiscent of a claxon sounding; it starts with a gulp and intake of breath and then has a downward, upward and downward tone. The upward is more prolonged than the downward tones. The alarm signals the arrival of the person who will decide whether team members are 'managed up or out'. In conjunction with the words which follow the wordless sound, such as being 'seen as a bit of a hatchet person' and 'people start keeping you at arm's length', Catherine's self-perception of the role she is being asked to do, is not just that it makes her disliked, but someone who might harm others. Neither of us laughs as this is not funny. Her narrative begins to make me feel uncomfortable as I recall times when I was in an HR role where I noticed non-HR staff seemed wary of me. I am transported back to my former role in the interview as memories are triggered by her account. It is her storytelling skills which parachute me into my past, bringing my imagination to the fore. Yet it takes these moments of re-imagining past experience which then position me as someone who has had a similar experience to bring her narrative to life for me. I do not become engrossed in her narrative until that point. We then become two people sharing a similar experience, able to communicate beyond words.

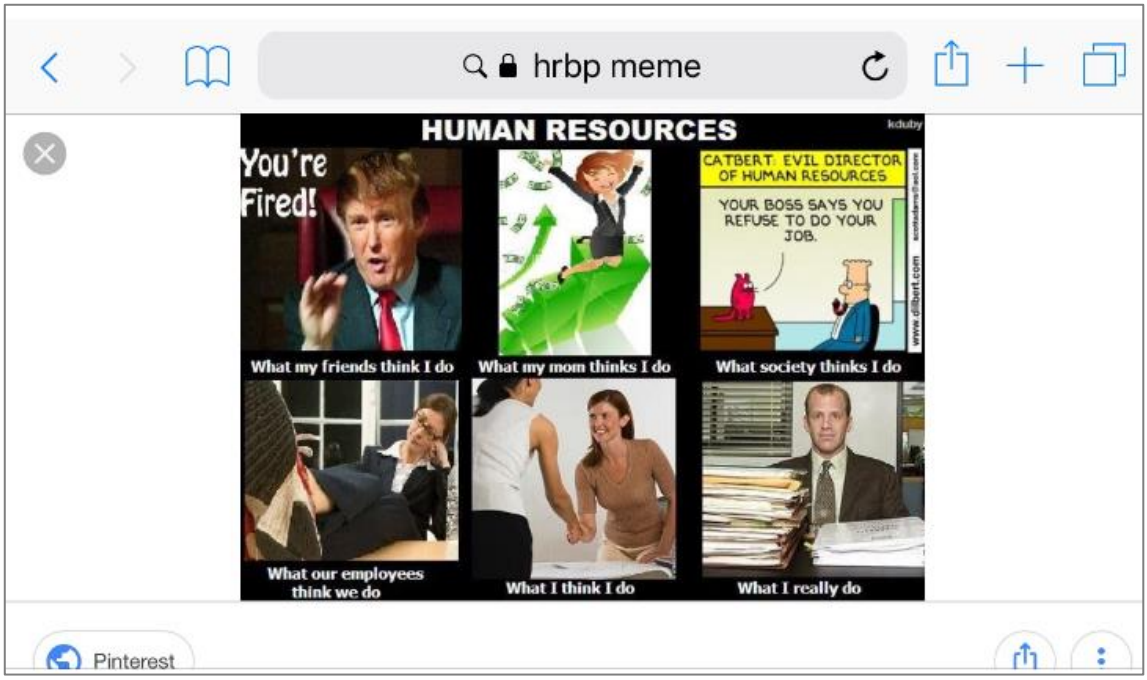
Her diegetic narrative, her ability to tell a 'good' story, conveys meaning, helping me better understand her experiences. As narrator she positions herself as a main character, she is not distant from her account. This has the effect of drawing me in and makes me want to listen. She makes a claxon sound (as opposed to stating through language that a claxon sounded). She does not use the sound to imitate a physical object that she has heard in the workplace, but uses it to portray how she

imagines staff feel about her arrival. The sound has the effect of transporting me to the room at the point when she arrives, leaving my seat in the interview room. Her choice of sound over spoken word has the power to transport me as it 'conveys meaning' (Knight-Hill, 2019, p.661) and generates a response where I join in the action with her.

Catherine reintroduces humour to express the tensions and contradictory perceptions of the HR role, when she explains the photograph of the cartoon-like image shown in photograph 4.2. Laughter introduces it:

> (Laughs) So this I thought, so this sums up kind of people who are not in HR, and erm, and what they think.

Photograph 4.2 - HRBP memes (Pinterest, 2020b)



She states 'society thinks […] all you do is chastise people', employees think all we do is 'feet up on the desk, think we don't do anything'. The image highlights contradictory perceptions others are thought to have about the role, negative tasks such as firing and disciplining staff versus HR practitioners' own desires that they are building positive relationships, further contrasted with an image of the 'reality' of the role – an administrator surrounded by paperwork. Catherine explains that:

> I put this (photograph) in because erm, my erm, my mum never understood my job. And erm she'd say 'so what is it that you do again?' 'I work in HR mum'. 'So what's that?' 'Well you remember it as personnel'. 'Oh, right!' 'Have

> you got any idea what I do on a day-to-day basis?' 'No'. 'Right, ok, we'll just leave it at that then shall we'.

In the passage above she enters into a replayed conversation with her mother, using direct speech where she assumes both characters' voices in the dialogue. When playing herself, her voice sounds frustrated and clipped in response to her mother's questions as she does not want to explain the details of what her work entails, or alternatively she expresses her frustration with her mother that she expected her to know what 'HR' is rather than what 'personnel' was. This creates a dramatic effect within her narrative (diegesis). In addition, her use of humour to express her belief that others have contradictory perceptions of her work illustrates both superiority and distance. Superiority in that laughing at others' misconceptions of the role makes her superior to those that do not understand, but distance as in doing so she differentiates herself from non-HR staff (Tracy, Myers and Scott, 2006). Yet by switching the joke back on herself (she is in 'reality' a paper-pusher) she enables her audience to laugh at her lack of superiority but is superior as she laughs at herself (Lynch, 2002).

I laugh along with her as she explains the image. I 'get' the joke and it is meaningful to me given my past experience and I recall similar conversations with friends and family who I felt did not understand what my HR role entailed. As her interview progresses, I find myself switching in and out of experiencing her narrative as HR practitioner and as academic researcher. When I experience her narrative as HR practitioner I feel empathy towards her (which I did not express as I did not want to influence her account). When I experience it as academic researcher I feel more distant from her account. For example, as she tells me of the hostility she experiences from the trade union shop steward who has reduced her to tears I feel empathy (it is an experience I can identify with). Whereas, towards the end of her interview she talks about a phrase she uses when coaching line managers 'managing with a human touch'. I feel unconvinced and critical of what to me are empty words and manage my emotions in the interview in order to be neutral and non-judgemental. Her use of humour also has the effect of bringing me onto her side where we laugh together about the tensions and struggles of HR work. At times I laugh with relief that I no longer work in HR when she recounts some emotionally challenging situations.

At the end of the interview she becomes conscious she has talked too long 'I told you (laughing) I could talk a glass eye to sleep, I did warn you (laughing)' when I realise how long we have been talking and try to bring the interview to an end. Her use of one-liners breaks up the serious sections of her account. This is a possible means of reducing the tension from recounting the stressful aspects of her role, where she uses humour as relief (Collinson, 2002; Freud et al., 1960). She tells me she uses humour in the workplace in a similar way:

> I think the previous HR lady sort of banned banter and wouldn't have a giggle with them (staff) or anything cos it was just too much of a, give em an inch and they'll take a mile kind of scenario, but I'm, I use humour to deflect a lot of things and to diffuse a lot of things.

Her comment makes me question whether she uses humour to deflect topics she may not want to talk about in the interview. However, humour enables her to narrate her account and present herself to her audience in the way she chooses.

Catherine characterised herself as a 'hatchet person' to represent feeling disliked. A different participant, Lorraine, showed a photograph of a crocodile to represent similar feelings. I interpret her narrative next.

Lorraine – playing 'an underhanded crocodile'

Lorraine explains her role involves 'a lot of exiting of people out of the business' and shares photograph 4.3 (shown overleaf) of a framed drawing of a crocodile explaining its meaning as:

> So, that is a bit about (laughs) lots of times in your life where you're not liked are you?

The laughter she expresses in the middle of the sentence has the effect of a pause, which places significance on the words that follow as I wonder what she will say that is going to be funny. The story behind the picture and the significance of the crocodile representation is not funny to me.

Lorraine explains she bought the drawing for her parents (who both passed away around six months earlier and it is now displayed in her house). She states:

> He's got a smile on his face, but actually nobody likes a crocodile do they? He looks quite innocuous, but actually erm, (laughs) you know, he can bite (laughing).

Photograph 4.3 – 'Being an underhanded crocodile'

Her laughter in the middle of the sentence again breaks up and gives significance to the killer line 'he can bite'. I laugh along with her. I find the photograph image bizarre and unexpected and my laughter is nervous. She explains the times she feels disliked are when she is required to make people redundant and states:

> Lorraine: […] one that I'm about to do at the moment with, you know, a manager that's not performing and she's gone off sick and quite frankly she's barking mad and she needs to go, and we've put up with her for far too long and I'm going to go and have a protected conversation with her to say 'come on'.
>
> Liz: Yeah, it's not working out.
>
> Lorraine: 'Come on, best for both of us really, here's a, here's a nice fat pay' … 'you know, you don't really want to be here, we don't want you anymore, come on, let's sort it out'. But it's that all, you've got to be quite nice and gentle and smiley and lovely and 'ooh I'd love a cup of tea thank you very much'. And afterwards you go actually 'so this is the figure' (laughs) 'do you want it?' Isn't it, it's? But you can do that in a relatively nice way, you know, sitting in front of people and making them redundant is not easy.

As she recounts the example she places herself as the main character in her narrative, stating her own imagined lines but not those of the employee she will be dismissing. My field notes show that I am drawn into her retelling to the extent that I add my own line and interrupt her dialogue with 'it's not working out'. We are now

two HR practitioners having a conversation in the interview and she can share the tactics she uses to get the job done (as she thinks I will understand and not judge?). Yet I do not experience/'live' her story with her. Even though I add my own line to her narrative, I do this to demonstrate my own credibility. I want her to understand that I both know and have experienced what she is talking about; that I have also been in such a situation, and therefore what she tells me does not shock me, enabling her to speak as she must. Yet I feel uneasy listening to her.

The photograph is an artistic representation of her experiences of emotions, one where she reports she is required to act in insincere ways in the workplace. Her words together with the photograph create an image in my mind of the crocodile about to seize its prey by luring it into the water (with 'a nice fat pay … ') before rolling underneath with it. There is a hidden predatory undertone to her explanation of the photograph representing her perception of others not liking her. This goes beyond constructing herself a hate figure; she plays into a deliberate deception of those who are her victims, illustrated through her imagined future conversation with the underperforming manager. She recounts how she is expected to behave 'you've got to be quite nice and gentle and smiley and lovely' engendering an impression of support and care, accepting cups of tea in people's homes who are sick. But this 'niceness' is disrupted by mention of payment in exchange for the manager's exit, a sinister financial transaction. Unlike Catherine's narrative where I became part of the comedy, here I find myself listening to a darker drama which I do not want to be part of where I am not thrown back to my past. I remain in my seat in the interview room. I struggle to relate to the crocodile image which needs explanation (whereas Catherine's 'hug' slogan told an instantly recognisable story). Lorraine further explains:

> Sometimes you feel like you're being an underhanded crocodile because you, you have to, be quite hard, and then other times you, you're softening your crocodile aren't you, genuinely trying to be as nice as you can, but you know that you're not, you're not popular because you are actually serving notice on somebody, and change their life.

I take the questioning 'you're softening your crocodile aren't you?' as her acknowledgement that she is stating this to someone who she believes will understand; as I have done similar tasks in the past (which I made her aware of during the interview). Alternatively she says this as a way of persuading the listener

to agree with her, to accept that insincerity is required. Her laughter at this point has subsided and with her statement that doing this will 'change their life' her tone becomes serious. Her narrative is confession-like in the interview as there is the possibility that she begins to realise through narrating her experience who she is/what she has become. She articulates her attraction to the drawing stating:

> It's just such a beautiful detail drawing, I mean it's only a print of, obviously part of a crocodile, but the looking at the, I can stand and look at the detail for, you know, half an hour, it's lovely.

As she states this her speech slows and she pauses before continuing (I do not fill the silence). She cannot explain the attraction to the crocodile 'I don't know why, I just like him'. When viewing photographs, Barthes (2000) suggests they have two meanings 'studium' – the cultural recognisable and public meaning (a crocodile), and 'punctum' – the private individual meaning that is difficult to articulate but may be represented by an emotional connection to something in the image, or a 'prick'. The punctum Lorraine articulates and points to in the photograph is the crocodile's skin, the 'beautiful detail'. Her attraction to the 'lovely' drawing is juxtaposed with the predatory crocodile itself. One interpretation is that she cannot see the bigger picture, the whole crocodile and the implication of her work on others or herself. She is caught up in the detail of the drawing or in the task of 'exiting' people from the business. She is required to perform/use emotions for organisational gain, smiling outwardly but ready to 'bite'.

Catherine and Lorraine's accounts demonstrate two different characterisations of feeling disliked (from hatchet person to predatory crocodile). Though different characterisations, they both demonstrate the emotionally violent side of the work HR practitioners are required to do. With both participants my prior experience appears significant for a number of possible reasons such as helping establish rapport between us, sharing experience and knowledge of their work; enabling them to 'open up' to someone who might understand and not judge. Though other participants did not offer such evocative characterisations of themselves, their experiences of feeling disliked generated strong emotions ranging from feeling distrusted to unapproachable to blamed.

Reinforcing HR's negative reputation

The 'no-one likes us' narrative was illustrated not only by participants' perceptions that non-HR staff disliked them, but how participants felt about other HR practitioners whom they denigrated and expressed disdain for how they enacted their work.

For example:

> Gosh, these (HR) people exist that just think people are transactions […] it's frightening isn't it? (Janet).
>
> I've met people in HR who … will walk into a room and sack someone off and not give a damn about it (Sarah).

Sophie was critical of other HR practitioners' lack of collaboration with managers:

> You can see why people get negative about HR if they are doing that kind of role and are just seen as, you know, blockers and trying to put things in the way.

Alan criticised HR staff for not behaving as they expect others to stating:

> We're (HR) not very good at following our own advice are we? In everything though, in recruitment, in, in you know, I've been in teams where the onboarding process for an HR person has been absolutely terrible and, but, and we don't do return to work interviews on time and we're awful.

Lorraine even recounted being criticised by HR staff in her own organisation when she had to make HR staff redundant (whilst facing redundancy herself):

> We got a lot of stick from our own (HR) staff which was the hardest thing of all […]. We would do like a Q and A, and one of my team would gather in the questions […]. We got something like 350 questions from the business […] and we were getting pasted by our own HR staff for not doing it quick enough.

Whereas Elaine set HR practitioners in her own organisation apart from others that she denigrated because of her perception that they are only seen doing 'bad' work, a view she found funny:

> I don't think that we're (HR) seen as the really bad people like in some organisations. I think cos we're out and about seeing people, we're actually there. Whereas some organisations HR sit in an office and don't get out do they? And they only come out when they are disciplining someone or something like that (laughs).

These examples demonstrate that participants acknowledged both the negative perceptions they believed others held of them and amplified them with their own (perceptions and experiences). They did not say that they themselves were guilty of the criticisms they levelled at other HR practitioners. The 'no-one likes us' narrative,

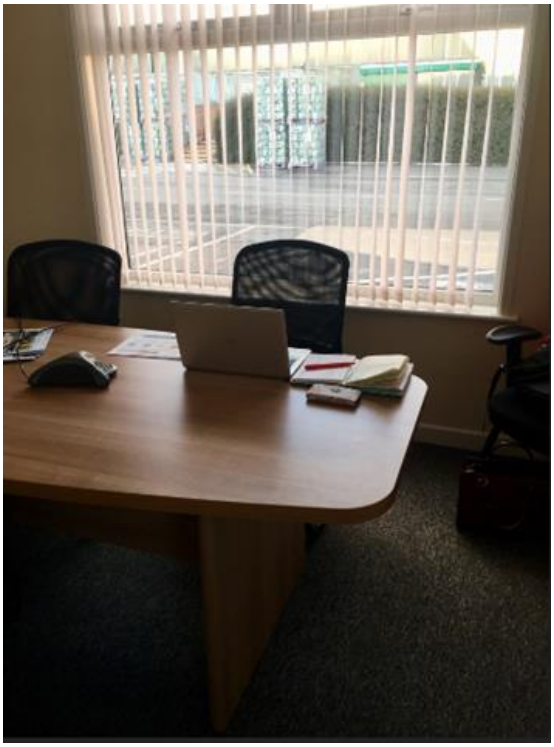
and not even liking ourselves, resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation which I set out next.

Feeling lonely and having few friends

Catherine showed a photograph of her empty desk at one of the sites she visits which represented ‘a day in the life of’ a field-based HR business partner (photograph 4.4). She described it as ‘a bit of a lonely existence’ because:

> When I go to the sites I’m not part of the site because of the nature of the job that I do. You are a little bit more removed.

Photograph 4.4 – ‘A bit of a lonely existence’



However, Sophie reported that:

> I think it (HR) can be a really lonely place erm, and because everything’s a judgement isn’t it? […] They (managers) wouldn’t need us if it was you know, so easy.

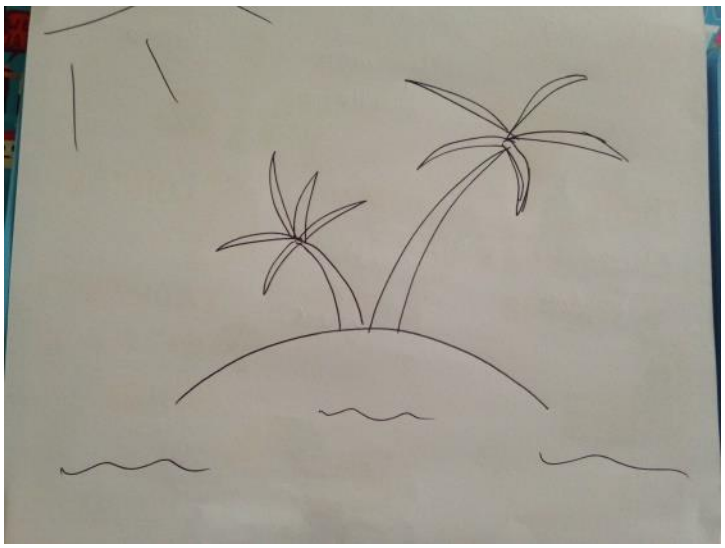
Her loneliness resulted from feeling judged as a result of the advice she gave to managers. She illustrated this through photograph 4.5 overleaf.

Photograph 4.5 – 'It (HR) can be a lonely place'

Anna drew an image that she then photographed (photograph 4.6), using the metaphor of an island to describe how she and her line manager deliberately isolated themselves from non-HR staff due to a perceived requirement to be impartial:

> I drew an island, but like Switzerland. So, well, we say that's how we're supposed to be but I thought an island is a nicer drawing, because you've got to be impartial on both sides […]. I think like from an emotional point of view as a person, I think … trying to be an island (laughs) and be so that people can come to you for advice, know that it's going to be confidential, trust in you for, for giving good advice but also trusting you to be confidential ... it can be quite isolating. That's why I drew a little island.

Photograph 4.6 – 'Feeling like Switzerland'



Feeling lonely was intensified by having few workplace friends apart from HR peers where participants stated:

> Ooh, we're on our little island, we've got no friends! (laughing) (Anna).
>
> Yeah I have very few friends, not that sounds a horrible thing to say, I'm very pleasant to everyone and I get on very well with the firm, they're a lovely bunch of people actually, erm in terms of friendships outside of HR, it's probably only one or two that I actually trust (Sarah).
>
> When you work in HR you've nobody else to go to have you? (Lorraine).

Whilst Anna laughed about having no friends, Natalie lamented only having HR colleagues for support:

> We kind of *have to* support each other, because we've not got anybody else, so, it's quite sad really.

But being able to confide in HR peers was important to avoid feeling isolated and for support:

> I think we are a close (HR) team. Erm, so I would, we share a lot about things that are going on and that's really important with some of the frustrations […] if you can't, you don't have that, then it can be very isolating, and I think that could start to, potentially cause you problems (Sophie).
>
> The issue of being in HR, is you all kind of have to support each other a bit, […] you can't talk about the stuff that's going on outside of, that group […] because of confidentiality so, at, at the end of the day your HR team, and the support that you have within each other is really important (Sarah).

Yet in one organisation HR's isolation was enforced to the extent that workplace social events were avoided, as Janet reported being told by one of the HR team on joining her organisation:

> The HR people (in this organisation) are not comfortable going into the canteen for lunch. They don't … the girls that we've replaced did tell me that 'we don't mix with the staff in the canteen' and in fact she went one further and said 'I don't go to the Christmas dinner, cos we can't mix with the staff'.

In summary, the 'no one likes us narrative' emerged from participants' interviews, illuminating how HR practitioners themselves feel about their jobs. They are required to do work that puts them in a position where they are not liked, and they therefore experience loneliness at work. In the interviews they used humour to communicate the experience of feeling disliked, to build rapport with me so they could do so, to express the absurd and make their experiences seem less threatening. Some even laughed at themselves in a self-denigrating way 'signalling that they are in control of

the situation by making fun of their weakness' (Schnurr and Chan, 2011, p.21), such as laughing at perceptions that they are isolated and only visible when they do 'bad' things. Yet despite the laughter and self-mockery, the recognition of being underhanded and disliked, in which laughter seems a defence that keeps emotional harm at bay, they report feeling lonely. Loneliness was experienced as a result of their (deliberate) isolation from non-HR staff, which introduced the emotion of sadness to their narrative. The contrast with their laughter was stark.

'I'd hate your job!' Handling toxic emotions

The first narrative 'no-one likes us' identified the feelings experienced from being disliked. The second narrative 'I'd hate your job' illustrates the feelings experienced from doing work that others did not wish to do themselves, that is, handling emotional toxicity from unhappy or emotionally charged employees. Participants described these experiences using words such as 'difficult', 'draining' and in Lorraine's case 'damaged'. This narrative is important in relation to the research questions; how do HR practitioners talk about emotional experiences and how do they evaluate those experiences? In this section I first set out examples of emotionally difficult, draining and damaging work from across participants' accounts. I then explore the narratives of four participants: Anna, Alan, Catherine and Sophie. These were selected as they provide rich illustration of this narrative but also as the mimetic/diegetic narrative features of their accounts differ.

Participants reported positive examples of their work, but these were brief, in contrast to their narration of negative experiences. Ten out of the eleven study participants described their work as either 'difficult' or 'emotionally draining'. Their differentiation between difficult or emotionally draining work highlights the subjective nature of participants' experiences of emotion. Difficult work involved doing work that others perceived negatively and dealing with the resulting criticism. Draining work was experienced where they absorbed others' emotional difficulties. Only one participant, Ruth, did not explicitly refer to her work in these terms and reported positive experiences overall. Examples of difficult work included:

> Some of it (HR work) can be a bit difficult […] hard conversations, and meeting, well sickness meetings and stuff like that and some consultations we've been doing recently, which have been alright but there's always some people that make it a bit difficult, they don't like what you're gonna do and what you're implementing so make it quite hard (Elaine).

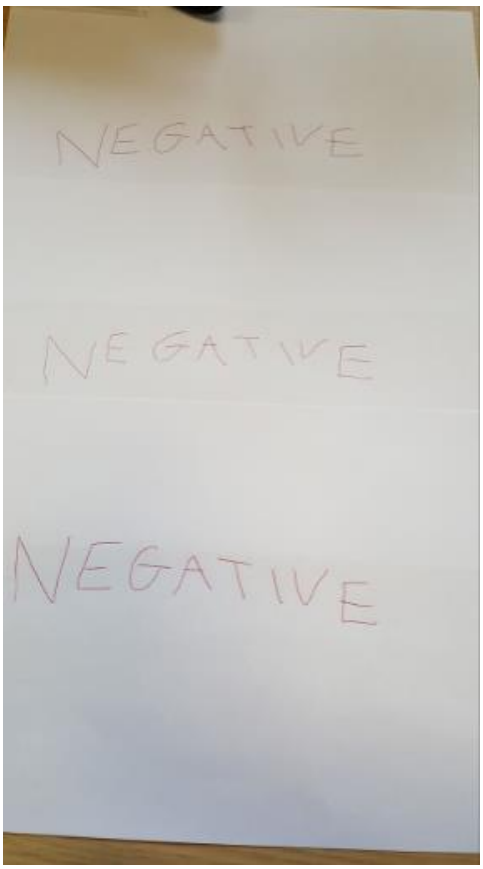
> I were the HR advisor for a lot of them (disciplinary) meetings […] and it were hard trying to be the person in the middle because these guys (employees) were being really awkward about it as well, even to us, and it so that were quite a stressful one for us, for me to deal with (Jack).

Examples of draining work included:

> You've got lots of nice and lots of happy and nice stuff and then you've got the other end of it, processes and things which can be really, really erm draining actually. Erm, and erm, yeah, terribly upsetting (Sarah).

> I'm now at a point where I'm done with being a HR advisor, you know, it's, it's draining, it's really negative […] actually it's (HR work) quite … repetitive […] yesterday I did a sickness meeting, tomorrow I've got a sickness meeting, Friday I've got a sickness meeting, so it's just this, you know, continuation of just … negative, negative things (shows photograph 4.7) (Natalie).

Photograph 4.7 – 'It's (HR work) more negative than just one negative'



Lorraine used the word 'damaging' to describe one of her experiences of HR work which she associated with feeling shame. She told me how she was required to close down a business and then make herself redundant:

> So after […] becoming known as the person that makes everybody redundant and having that reputation, and then having experienced it on the other side with no support at all […] I remember being in a lift, I remember it so clearly, going up in a lift with the MD of, at (company name) was to, to, to go into the

> first consultation meeting, and this guy […] taking the mickey out of the staff that we were about to go into consultation with, and me laughing and going 'ha, ha, ha, ha, ha' and then actually thinking 'that is appalling what you've just said about those people'. But I was more appalled about myself that I was, I'd just gone along with it and, and not challenged it. And then I'd had this, sort of quite damaging experience if you like that had, you know built up lots and lots of experience but was quite hard.

Lorraine articulates her memories of this event 'I remember it so clearly' and re-enacts both her reactions and internal thoughts at the time. The 'ha, ha, ha, ha, ha' places her in the moment of the event as the villain's accomplice where she laughs along with him, something she immediately regrets where she is 'appalled about myself' and becomes self-conscious of her own moral behaviour that she evaluates negatively (Greenbaum et al., 2019). Doing redundancies, including those of her HR peers (and being disliked for it) and then making herself redundant was work she described as 'damaging' and 'hard'.

I present my interpretation of four participants' accounts of doing difficult and draining work next.

Performing difficult and draining work

Anna went into HR work believing she would be helping people. The way she tells her narrative and the emotions present during her interview, such as sarcasm and frustration, suggest her disillusionment with the profession she is in as opposed to the one she thought she had joined. Emotions arise from the incongruence between expectation and reality. A reality where she wants to help people but they do not want to be helped in the way Anna thinks they should, they want her to be an administrator.

In narrating her experiences, Anna varies her pitch and intonation frequently, emphasising particular words and mimicking others' voices. She also makes gestures that I notice and point out to her; for example, she 'pulls faces' when trying to describe emotions she cannot name and rolls her eyes. Other physical gestures include clicking her fingers and clapping her hands at different points to emphasise her account and sighing heavily. Her account is also characterised with laughter, wordless words and sounds, sometimes accompanied by expressive facial displays. For example, when she cannot find the words to label her emotions:

Anna: Nobody really understands what we do, nobody appreciates the scale of what we are responsible for, and so sometimes it can just be quite …

Liz: Yeah

Anna: Euch! (Laughs)

Liz: Erm, for the tape, a bit of a face like euch! (Laughs)

Anna: (Laughs)

We laugh together about her wordless word 'euch' and there is good rapport between us, to the extent I am comfortable to point out the face she makes and joke about it. Her statement 'nobody really understands what we do' suggests she believes the interviewer might understand – she shares her experiences with me knowing that we have shared experience of the same work. This excerpt is illustrative of the rapport I feel between us during the interview where for the majority of it I imagine I am sitting opposite her as a fellow HR practitioner.

One of the first questions I ask illustrates the diegetic features of her narrative:

Liz: How would you describe how you feel about the role?

Anna: It depends what day you ask me! (Laughs) I've been, I've been *shouted at, twice* this morning so not feeling that great! (Laughs)

Liz: Oh, by who?

Anna: By two employees that weren't very happy … about payroll related issues. That seems to be the main thing that they get upset about which is understandable.

Liz: Yeah

Anna: But erm,

Liz: What literally shouted at? Properly?

Anna: Yes, yes one of them said (angry voice) 'I'm not having an argument with you'. I'm like (apologetic voice) 'I'm trying to help' (Laughs)

Liz: Sounds like you are! (Laughs)

Anna: Yes (Laughs, sighs). It ended better but I was just like, it sometimes

Liz: Yeah

Anna: It's just (clicks fingers once) erm, yeah (Laughs).

Liz: No, I get that.

Anna: I forgot what the question was …

Anna surprises me with an outburst of emotions when our interview has only just begun, recounting a story about facing anger for a payroll error alongside laughter. I also find the sarcasm in her statement ‘it depends what day you ask me!’ followed with a giggle, unexpected. Her intonation rises on the words ‘shouted at’ and ‘twice’ followed with a louder and longer burst of laughter. Rather than shouting in the interview she places emphasis on these words, becoming aware she is not in her story-world but narrating her account to an audience in a research interview. I ask two successive questions to try and understand what has happened. I am quickly immersed in this drama and want to become part of it. I question whether she is exaggerating; surprised that she was shouted at by another adult. This leads her to re-tell the conversation with the angry employee voiced in different characters, a possible way of her trying to make her account sound credible to me. This brings me onto her side as I then add my own line into the drama, placing myself as a third character in it, where I defend her and retort back in sarcastic tone to the employee ‘sounds like you are!’ In doing so I demonstrate the empathy I feel towards her for being shouted at by another adult. She clicks her fingers as she cannot find the words to describe how the incident made her feel, or she does not want to say and laughs again. She is so engrossed in her drama that she has forgotten the point of her telling me this, and asks me to repeat my question.

Her laughter expressed in the interview does not match the emotions she recounts experiencing. It is possible that it is a way of dealing with the morning’s difficult emotional experience (Sandberg and Tutenges, 2019) as she relives it. For example, she describes feeling ‘not […] that great’ whilst laughing, a possible way of diverting attention from her ‘true’ feelings about it where she may feel hurt. However, her laughter is pointed, it has a target. She uses irony to highlight the contradiction (Hatch, 1997) as she mimics the employee’s angry voice shouting ‘I’m not having an argument with you’. Sarcasm and irony are used to highlight an experience where she does not label her feelings, bar explaining they differ from day to day. Anna explains she handed this situation over to her boss so that she could attend our interview. I feel guilty that she has come straight from it to our interview. There is the possibility that she laughs about it in relief that she is removed from the situation as ‘people laugh upon realizing that a threat is no longer a threat’ (Glenn, 2003, p.22).

I remain drawn into her drama as illustrated in later dialogue between us. She shows photograph 4.8 of her in-trays stating ‘I get dragged into too much unnecessary admin that admin should be doing’ which we discuss further:

Photograph 4.8 – ‘I get dragged into too much unnecessary admin that admin should be doing’

.

Liz: It’s just making me think, we talk about HR *was* an administrative function?

Anna: Yeah, yeah

Liz: I wonder if it still is? (Laughs)

Anna: Well it is! (Laughs) Yeah (Laughs) and that’s the, we’re trying to move away, well not move away, move to being more an advisory function and it’s like, it’s like ‘we’re dragging ourselves’ and ‘stay’, ‘stay’ and ... (Laughing)

Liz: So the employee, the other employees?

Anna: Well and some of the management too … are like ‘but we want *this* so don’t do it like *that.*

Liz: (Laughing)

Anna: So yeah, it is a lot, a lot … of admin. And that’s what, like I’ve said I get dragged into so much unnecessary admin that admin should be doing, I shouldn’t have to cover it, it shouldn’t, I don’t cover it for any of the other sites, they should have to, deal with it themselves but they’re just like ‘no please do it’ (Laughs).

Liz: I’m begging you!

Anna: (Laughs)

I make a representational connection to her photograph which reminds me of all the administration/paperwork involved in my former HR roles which leads me to joke that HR is still an administrative function. We agree and are both critical of HR work. She then plays out the mini-drama, using her body to physically and verbally perform the employee's behaviour; hand gestures when she says 'we're dragging ourselves' and 'stay, stay', where she reached out in front of her with both hands and then pulled her hands towards her torso on the words 'stay'. Her gestures make me laugh and we laugh together. With the line 'I'm begging you' I place myself in her mini-drama, mirroring her croaky, slow voice where I also perform the role of employees and managers who want HR to remain an administrative function (having experienced this myself). I have become an active participant in her performance and, similar to the haptic experience of watching an engrossing film, I have projected myself into her drama and am an active participant immersed in it (Marks, 2000).

Incongruity drives the humour; incongruity between her expectation that HR work *should* be paperless and advisory and managers' and employees' wish that she do administrative work. It is funny to me as I have 'contextual knowledge' (Hatch, 1997, p.279) that HR work is still administrative, despite being espoused as strategic. Our laughter arises from 'a perceived inconsistency between what one believes will happen or should happen' (Glenn, 2003, p.19). But I also find getting involved in the drama fun. I am enjoying myself. She seems to enjoy it too (or why else would she put on such a performance for her audience?).

These excerpts demonstrate how Anna is required to handle strong emotions and the contradictions between what she thinks she should do and what she is asked to do. I am able to put myself in her position and empathise with her. However, this was not the case with all participants, as I illustrate next.

Doing difficult work – Sophie the heterodiegetic narrator

Sophie is not a main character in her narrative; she is distant from it to the extent she rarely features in it and is a non-diegetic/heterodiegetic narrator (Milostivaya, 2018). Emotions are rarely expressed in her interview, neither reported nor present when she talks about emotion. She presents herself as an 'official' HR professional, i.e. she talks like she represents the HR professional body. I feel we do not establish

rapport in the interview, there is distance between us and she positions me as an academic researcher. She does not acknowledge my past experience even though I make her aware of it and I am not transported back to it during our interview. I sit firmly in my seat in the interview room (but not glued to it, I want to escape due to the lack of rapport between us that makes me feel uncomfortable).

Few details are revealed to illustrate the points she makes, and the most notable difference from other interviews is her heavy reliance on the pronouns 'you' and 'we' when I ask her questions about herself. 'I' is used less frequently and often when followed by a word signalling rationality i.e. 'I think'. It is as if she distances herself from revealing anything about herself in the interview, in the same way she tells me that she chooses not to reveal anything personal at work. She talks about the difficult nature of the job that she is required to do, using the example of a member of staff who recently died:

> What you have in HR as well is you erm, they're there to support managers who are dealing with that (the death of a staff member) and colleagues, you know, within the team who are dealing with that as well, so you have a tendency to take on that emotional baggage, might not be the right word, but you are there as a support and you, I don't think people always think about that, the aspect of, you know, of that. I mean if you're even, if you're sat in a, you know, in a capability hearing, and you're dismissing somebody who's terminally ill, you know, which sounds awful, we do that, we do that for the right (laugh) I say the right reasons, but that's also a financial consideration. So they choose to be dismissed because it's financially better for their family, but even having that discussion and having to go through that is difficult, it's hard.

With her opening words 'what you have in HR […] is they're there to' she places me as an outsider, not someone who might understand. When talking about dismissing the terminally ill, or dealing with the death of a staff member her words display little emotion. She acknowledges that doing the dismissal 'sounds awful' but reduces handling others' emotions as 'baggage' to take on. In stating 'I don't think people always think about that' she suggests the difficult nature of her work is overlooked by others. However I feel little empathy towards her, despite the emotionally difficult nature of the situations she describes. This is because she summarises generic HR tasks, she does not recount them as situations she is directly involved in but looks down on them from a distance and comments on them. She tells the narrative from

an ‘official’ HR perspective not a personal one where she features in the narrative as a character. I connect to what she says (mimesis) but am not drawn in.

As we continue she shares a more personal account, telling me about attending a training session with HR colleagues where the facilitator asked if participants were comfortable discussing their personal mental health:

> Sophie: […] it was quite uncomfortable as well because erm, so I’m not somebody who would come to work and tell people, just come and this is going on or that’s going on. And neither would I cos I’ve worked there for a long time, but some people are quite open aren’t they?
>
> Liz: Yeah
>
> Sophie: And I’ve worked with people like that and you’ve got to know everything that’s going on and all the drama, erm, I’m not like that, so erm, there’s a tendency to bottle it up, so that was actually quite difficult.

Though this is one of the rare occasions where she reveals how she experiences emotion, she reverts back to third person at the end ‘there’s a tendency to bottle it up’, rather than ‘I have a tendency to … ’. Speaking about herself in this way is as if she is a disembodied voice; another example of her ‘looking in’ on herself from a distance. There is no drama in her account and she disparages drama in the workplace. Her words are mirrored by her behaviour in the interview. This is the mimetic narrative where what she says about how she behaves at work is mimicked in the interview.

Only at the end of the interview does her professional mask slip when I ask if there were any photographs she might have taken but did/could not:

> I suppose there might have been maybe one more on the emotional side, or some of the, that touched on about soaking up some of the emotions […] being in that situation kind of guiding somebody through that, erm and then go home and feel like really rubbish about being part of that decision […] so that can be quite upsetting. I mean I’ve been in situations where I’ve been genuinely upset and I’ve thought you know, I hate this job, I hate this job, cos it’s just horrible having to do that.

She does not provide any detail of situations that have made her feel ‘really rubbish’, so remains guarded but in describing times where she has been ‘genuinely upset’ suggests she feigns emotions at other times. Her comments that she sometimes ‘hates this job’ surprise me, as she has been an advocate for the HR profession to this point. She reveals that she has done emotionally difficult work that has had a

negative effect on her personally, and in doing so, just for those few moments, she unmasks the human being that has been sitting in front of me, before we walk out the interview door and back into her office where she replaces her mask of professionalism. As she shows me to the exit I feel that I am making my escape.

Doing and facing emotionally draining work

Alan is the HR manager in a hospice. The context of his workplace adds to the emotional nature of HR work as he states:

> I think, because, because you, you've, you've not only, only sometimes got the emotional drain that, that this place has because it's quite, it can be quite a difficult place to be for, for inherent stress of working in a place where people are often coming to die, but then you've also, you get the transference from staff as well when you're dealing with them, with their issues, but rewarding as well.

Our interview is held in the hospice training room. The atmosphere feels calm to me in contrast with the interviews held in the hustle and bustle of other participants' workplaces or meeting rooms in the university. Both Alan's words and being in the hospice have an emotional effect on me. I cannot imagine what it must be like to do HR work in this environment. I feel overwhelmed by the thought and sit back in a reflective mode throughout the interview. I do not want to be drawn into his narrative and assume my position as academic researcher (perhaps my own defence mechanism?).

Overall Alan's narrative indicates a strong identification with the purpose of the hospice. For example, one photograph he presents (not shown for confidentiality reasons) is taken from his office window stating:

> I was looking at out and actually just […] it made me think about where I was. So I'm not just in an office. I'm in a hospice, and we have to remember what we're doing. And that was, that was the bit with that really. It's quite simple (quiet voice).

It is because he works in this environment that he experiences some emotions. For example, he has an emotional response to an employee who has threatened an employment tribunal when his belief is that he has done nothing wrong:

> The things I find very difficult when it's, you know, somebody where you know you've done everything right … erm, and especially as a hospice somebody decides well 'no, actually I'm going to take you to court'. It doesn't sit right with me that. Erm and I don't know how it sits right with the people that potentially do it.

One interpretation of his response is that it is because a hospice is viewed as a 'good' organisation, a charitable one; he assumes no wrongdoing should be highlighted by others. He evaluates the complaining employee's behaviour against this moral standard and experiences negative emotions in response, noticing his discomfort/disgust that condemns their behaviour 'it doesn't sit right with me'. In doing so he places his societal and moral view of the hospice above his role, one where as HR manager he is required to objectively consider staff complaints. His moral emotions are triggered, experienced as a 'way of recognizing when they, or others, have or have not upheld moral standards (i.e. standards enacted by society to promote a well-functioning world)' (Greenbaum et al., 2019, p.2). He identifies more strongly with the hospice than his HR role, a role that he states he at times finds:

> It can be extremely stressful and it can be very draining. You have days where you're just absolutely shattered because you've been dealing with people's complex issues. And they do transfer to you and it's very difficult to, sometimes you, you naturally take things home with you.

Alan acknowledges he carries others' emotions and is unable to separate them from his work in an environment that is full of emotions. He further explains:

> You have to understand that people are in emotionally challenging situations, so they're coming to you with a degree of baggage and it's to be expected. So you've got that to begin with plus then, anything else they're coming to you with is kind of, of an addition. The cherry on the top might be something that's happening at home. So there is, there is to always kind of be a, I guess a little bit of a greater level of stress.

The statement 'you have to understand that' implies that he thinks I, his audience, or others do not. His assumption is correct that I have not experienced working in this environment. I keep listening as I need help to imagine what it must be like and he provides few examples that illustrate his point (which I understand given the sensitive nature of them). He hints towards the difficult nature of what he refers to as he jokes that:

> Alan: […] when you've got someone in your office crying, you're there. And you have to deal with it. Bit like, like the emergency services of work I suppose (laughs).
>
> Liz: Well yeah, that's interesting to think of it like that …
>
> Alan: Everything drops on our doorstep doesn't it?

> Liz: Mmm, absolutely
>
> Alan: There's nothing that, that, that doesn't. People bring all sorts to you.
>
> Liz: And often it's the stuff that you've got no idea what to do with (laughs). I used to think, when someone comes to your door, oh I've never dealt with this before.
>
> Alan: Oh there's something new every week, there's something that, that catches you out. I've often, I've often found that and I've learned not to worry about it.

I have experienced people crying in the HR office yet I had not thought of HR as an 'emergency services of work', hence my neutral comment that I find the remark 'interesting'. It did not happen very often. His use of the word 'our' rather than 'my' here suggests a possible attempt to integrate with his audience (Harding, 2008); in this case the interviewer. This is one of the few times he tries to draw me into his narrative as someone who might understand and I share past experience with him. I become aware that I may be too distant from him, so in doing so my aim is to establish more rapport between us so he might open up to me further; to remind him that I am not just sitting here as a researcher.

Alan has to be prepared for the random nature of emotional expression between people. Emotions are experienced through social interactions with others (Parkinson, 1996). In this case they arise through interactions with staff who come to his office (and he reports that rarely does he turn them away) where the expectation for 'dealing' with them becomes his. Being the person responsible for handling other people's emotions is noticed by others:

> It's an emotionally taxing … erm … career I think. Probably more so than a lot of people think, but interestingly since I've been here I have had a lot more people say to me 'I don't know how you do what you do', that 'I don't know how you put up with all these … ' and it's usually line managers that that I'm counselling through dealing with different issues. You know, I quite often get, 'I'd hate your job', which doesn't make you feel particularly good about your own job! (Laughs)

It could be argued that these comments suggest he feels stigmatized, because dealing with others' emotions is constructed as an undesirable task. Handling others' emotions might even be considered 'dirty', not in the sense of having physical, social and moral taints (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951), but emotional ones. McMurray and Ward's (2014, p.1134) empirical study of Samaritan workers extended the term 'dirty work' to include 'emotional dirt' where they state it:

> ‘Describes a subjective state assigned by either the individual involved or outside observers through which emotions are deemed to be in some sense polluting. Such pollution is repellent to the extent that it threatens a sense of solidarity, stability or order’.

Though HR practitioners are not necessarily regularly engaged with life or death situations (though Alan works in a hospice which deals with death) they face into a broad range of serious employee personal issues. By engaging with the emotions expressed by employees experiencing such issues, these emotions become polluting in the sense that they threaten the professional, managerialist focus of much HR work where the desired state, for example, is to work on ‘strategic’ issues, not to engage with emotions considered a taboo, such as sadness/tears which are ‘contextually inappropriate’ (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p.1139) for the workplace. Alan draws on the affirmation that others give to the difficult emotional nature of his work, a way of validating that his work is unenvied by others, or alternatively he feels pride in a job that others could not do. As I leave the interview I remain reflective and feel admiration for HR practitioners who work in hospices. I think that I also could not do (or have done) that.

‘When it feels like it gets too bleak’.

Doing emotionally draining work is also an important narrative identified in Catherine’s account. She uses the metaphor of ‘walking the dog’ encapsulated by photograph 4.9 (shown overleaf) to visually illustrate:

> Catherine: but when we had the really bad snow, I just thought it was funny […] we were trudging through, and I, I was walking in front, I don’t know where all the dogs are […], it was just the pictures on (friends name) and (friends name) faces, with the, like a bit like the big parker that Kenny out of erm … (laughing)
>
> Liz: (laughing) South Park?
>
> Catherine: South Park wears, and they were just like so ‘oh it’s so cold and it’s horrible and it’s so …’ (Laughing)

She goes onto explain photograph meaning, that dog walking is like HR work:

> It doesn’t matter whether it’s snowing outside, you’ve still gotta get up, you’ve still gotta walk the dog, whether you like it or not because you know it’s the right thing for the dog … and that’s kind of how I feel about some of the things that I have to do. So they’re not pleasant, so at the moment I’m doing consultations for people. So it’s not pleasant, but I have to get up every day and I have to keep doing that.

Photograph 4.9 – 'When it feels like it gets too bleak'

Again, Catherine uses laughter to talk about a negative experience, in this case doing draining work. She introduces the fictional character of Kenny from South Park, a satirical animated cartoon series aimed at adults. I interject as she struggles to remember the name of the cartoon, keen to demonstrate I understand the joke as I am engrossed in a narrative I can relate to.

She labels the photograph as 'when it (HR) feels like it gets too bleak' and uses it to illustrate 'when I feel emotions'. Emotions are triggered when she does 'unpleasant' tasks, such as consultations with employees likely to result in difficult emotions/criticism expressed towards her. In describing photograph meaning she mimics her friends' voices complaining that 'it's so cold and it's horrible' which she equates with some of her experiences of HR work. I picture myself with my own dog walking behind them and imagine myself joining in.

She jokes that her friends in the photograph look like Kenny, one of the main characters in South Park. He is a nine year old boy who is known for wearing a parker hooded coat which muffles his speech, allowing him to get away with

swearing, and who is also known for his immortality. Each episode he is killed in various violent ways but returns in the next episode unscathed, often without explanation, only to be killed again (South Park Studios, 2019). Catherine's introduction of this fictional character is useful as a metaphor in that it suggests her work 'kills' her but she recovers and carries on the next day. Her work is repetitive (done every day), necessary (like dog walking), required ('you know it's the right thing for the dog') and unpleasant (done in 'cold and horrible' conditions), with painful consequences for her. It is, like dirty work, 'a necessary evil that repulses' (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p.1125) as others say in a sympathetic way 'I don't know how you do that job, it's tough'. On finishing Catherine's interview, though I have enjoyed the experience, laughed along and experienced the highs and lows of her work together with her, I feel relieved to no longer be in an HR role. I also do not envy her.

Overall, participants' accounts illustrated the requirement for HR practitioners to handle others' toxic/strong emotions. I do not discount that they had to handle their own, but introduce this point in the next chapter. Whereas the first narrative illustrated the emotions participants experienced from feeling disliked, this second narrative illustrates the emotions experienced from doing a job where the tasks they were required to do were emotionally difficult, draining or damaging; tasks that they reported others said they could not do. They reported experiencing emotions such as sadness, boredom and frustration, and moral emotions such as shame and disgust. Anna struggled to label her emotions, so used wordless sounds. Sophie expressed little emotion in the interview, something that mirrored her reported 'tendency to bottle it (emotion) up'. Laughter was used by some participants to help them narrate difficult and draining experiences, to express incongruity, or in Catherine's case make a difficult job seem funny by comparing the experience to a satirical cartoon character. Catherine and Alan drew sympathy from friends and colleagues about the difficult nature of their work. As their audience, my experience also varied from remaining in my interview seat, trying to understand what it might be like to work in a context/industry I had no experience of, to being propelled into a mini-drama they narrated. Yet how they positioned me in relation to their narrative had both positive and negative effects on me as I experienced emotions ranging from discomfort to enjoyment to empathy.

We're different

The third and final narrative of this chapter demonstrates how participants felt 'different' to non-HR staff and uncovers the emotions they experienced from being neither managers nor employees. Participants reported themselves being in tense, 'conflicting' and ambiguous organisational positions; a premise that has not subsided since Legge and Exley (1975, p.52) first highlighted 'a basic ambiguity that pervades the function' resulting from personnel managers' overlapping responsibilities with managers, an inability to clearly pinpoint their contribution, and their uncomfortable positioning in the middle of managers and employees. Alongside the discomfort experienced from being neither managers nor employees, participants' difference was accentuated through their positioning as people management 'experts' and from experiencing strong emotions which they could not necessarily/easily express, unlike others did towards them. They experienced a range of different emotions commonly using words to describe their feelings such as 'mixed' and 'frustrated' or struggled to label them at all.

I begin this section using Ruth's narrative to demonstrate HR's difference from other staff. I have chosen Ruth to begin with because her narrative was much more positive than other participants (and I do not only want to present negative accounts), because she articulated a sense of belonging to her organisation and support towards and from her peers, yet the premise of HR being different is still present in her account. I then illustrate this narrative using examples from across participants' accounts.

Not feeling like 'a little scrap on the side'

Ruth is the only participant to hold a board-level HR role. She is an HR director in a small and medium-sized organisation. The first photograph Ruth shows me is an internet image of a chocolate orange (not shown for copyright reasons). The photograph shows the chocolate orange unwrapped with some of the segments separated out on the foil wrapper. She describes the emotion it represents as 'that nice chocolatey feel really' stating:

> *Now* I feel like I'm part of that whole orange, I'm one of these (points at segments), whereas before, erm you know I wasn't one of those. The, the really senior people before were one of those and you were sort of, little scrap

> on the side, So it is, it is the way that I feel now is part of the whole journey. A, *everything*, not just HR, it's about *everything*.

Ruth presents herself as someone who has 'made it' having gained her position on the board. She reports feeling like 'an equal' to her senior-level peers in contrast to her previous HR experience where she felt like a 'little scrap on the side'. She further explains 'I always felt that HR was like secondary to everything else that was going on'. Her perception of what success is to her is to 'not just' be HR, i.e. to be more than HR, to step outside the traditional boundaries of her role 'and feeling, you know, as, as the same as everybody else, not different or back office'. As she points at the photograph, tapping on the two segments lying on the foil wrapper which are detached from the full chocolate orange, she helps me understand what both her words and the photograph represent – that being 'just HR' is an isolating experience. She infers, therefore, that HR staff experience 'different' feelings to 'everybody else' in organisations. When she was in a more junior HR role she was set outside of the management team. Although her narrative about her current job is positive, it demonstrates how those holding an HR role are viewed differently to other management roles where they are isolated and perceived inferior.

Ruth's interview had an emotional impact on me. In my field notes I wrote 'I enjoyed it, I felt relaxed with her, and she clearly loves her job and her relationships with other directors on the Board. It made me think I should have stayed in HR'. We have both previously worked in HR roles in the retail industry and she reported some experiences I identified with. I wanted to be part of her narrative as she painted a positive picture of her work to me.

Ruth described her managing director as 'really committed to the people, the culture, all of that stuff, so we're on the same page, and we get on famously'. Being accepted as part of the management team highlights the connection between good social relationships and her experience of positive emotions. However, she acknowledges 'it is not all roses' and recounts some of her critics asking, as she began to implement various policies and practices 'what's this HR wishy washy pink stuff?' Their voices were later silenced following the results of an external audit whereby 'we flew, you know, we sailed through with flying colours'.

As her narrative continued, she described how she has to work at building relationships, using the example of implementing new data protection legislation:

> You go to the board meeting and say, and your board report it's like 'this is coming in, in May and we need to do this' and they're like (sighs) glazed over. 'Oh, you do it'. 'No, we all have to be bought into it' (laughs). So you're constantly banging a drum (laughing) from that respect, mmm but they know, they know that I'll do it you see, so they're, it's just like 'well we'll leave it to you', but it's not just a HR thing it's a company-wide thing.

I ask her whether she has a good level of input into the board and she states:

> Ruth: Yes, I have now. I think they were a bit wary of me at first, and certainly the erm, the chairman […]. He used to come before the board meeting and meet up with all of the other directors for half an hour to see what was going on in their departments, but he never came to me.
>
> Liz: That's nice! (Laughs)
>
> Ruth: Yeah (laughs) and I used to say to (name) the chief exec, I said 'I think he doesn't like HR he just doesn't know what it is or what to do with it' (laughing). I mean he's perfectly pleasant with me and the stuff that I'd implemented he was always 'well done' and that, but he never wanted to come and talk about it. It's like 'oooh nooo' (laughs). Whereas the new non-executive chairman, he puts me in, er has a meeting with me just like he does with all the, all the rest of them.

Excepting the initial caution Ruth's peers had towards her and despite her reporting that she has positive relationships with fellow board members, she still has to 'bang a drum' to be heard. Her evocative language where she re-enacts the board meeting helps me imagine sitting around her board-room table where I sit amongst the 'glazed over' uninterested faces trying to convince them this is important to them as well as me. I have also had similar conversations that the latest initiative I am briefing should be business not HR-led (even though HR initiates it!). On reporting being ignored by the chairman I express empathy with my comment 'that's nice!' I recalled my own experiences of feeling 'different'; not feeling my voice was heard or viewed as important as the departmental heads I supported. It is this shared experience that places me in her narrative as another HR practitioner and I want to help her succeed. She has won me over.

Feeling different from being specialists

Feeling different was also described by other participants who set themselves apart from non-HR staff by reason of the confidential nature of their work and their inability to make friends outside of the HR function (for fear one day they might have to discipline or make them redundant, discussed in the first narrative 'no-one likes us'), their expertise as people specialists, and feeling they should (but did not always) role

model the policies they were responsible for. The following examples from Sarah, Sophie and Anna illustrate how participants viewed themselves as experts (setting themselves apart from others by reason of their HR knowledge) but found themselves and the advice they gave ignored/overruled:

> The partners have been very sceptical, or have been in the past about anything sort of slightly HR-related […]. They don't *get* it. […] What I find very difficult is when unfortunately you do get people who think they know about this stuff and they don't. And they almost just disregard your opinion, and that's an arrogance thing (Sarah).

That they 'don't *get* it' leads to Sarah's emotional experiences; where negative emotions are triggered by not having her opinion and expertise valued. Sophie enacted her imagined retort back to managers who criticised HR procedures and her expertise, defending herself:

> We're here to support, we're here to, you know, sometimes see things that maybe you don't see, things in a different perspective […]. We know what we're doing, to get the best for the organisation, that's why we're here, that's what we're trying to do. So when you feel the criticism, you know, you really feel like saying 'what do you think I'm doing?', and even some sensible managers, managers who've worked for us a long time and they'll say things like 'let's take that bit out of the procedure', 'do you think we just dream it up to make life difficult for you, do you think we'd do that, do you think we'd do that? That's not in anybody's interest is it, you know, come on'.

Anna felt her expertise was ignored which she represented with photograph 4.10 of a rubbish bin:

Photograph 4.10 – 'That was a pointless waste of my time'

> Anna: The CEO had advised the (head of department) to undertake disciplinary process cos of such and such an issue. They go off, duly follow process with us, and you know we get involved at that stage […]. I'll be on the appeal side, look at the evidence, view the evidence, absolutely a case to answer for. Speaks, he then speaks to the trade union and they decide to settle (long pause) […]. It just is so frustrating, disheartening […].
>
> Liz: How often would you say you feel like that?
>
> Anna: I think that sometimes you just feel like 'oh that was a pointless waste of my time'. And also cos the whole point of having your process and procedures and all that kind of stuff is for you and the employee to work through.

Anna tells me she deliberately staged the photograph to illustrate her feelings:

> That's just stuff that was in my in tray (laughs), I just dumped it in the bin (laughs) cos that's sometimes what you feel like happens (laughs).

In doing so, I imagine her replaying her feelings of frustration by physically 'dumping' the paperwork in the bin. Her dramatic act, shown through her artistic representation and words which re-present her experience, was effective.

These three examples illustrate the mismatch between the expertise participants felt they possessed and the value that managers placed on that expertise, i.e. managers sometimes ignored it.

In terms of the HR policies participants were responsible for, which established them as people experts, they did not follow the HR advice they gave to others:

> I'm part of the wellbeing group […] where we try and … so like, getting benches for outside some health centres, so in summer nurses can go outside and eat their lunch instead of eating it at their desk, but I'm, I eat at my desk, I'm really bad for it. So I don't practice what I preach (laughs) (Elaine).
>
> I think it would probably be very difficult to go off with stress as an HR person. I think that would be quite hard, because I just feel as if we should know what the coping mechanisms are, we should know better. We should follow our own advice (laughs) […]. I think personally I'd really struggle with that, cos I've not, I've not done what I tell other people to do (Alan).

Alan expresses guilt even for the possibility of taking time off work sick. Lorraine, a head of HR with an HR team, took time off work to care for her terminally ill parents and experienced 'absolute guilt':

> Lorraine: And it got to a point where I just went to the doctor's and got signed off sick, which I've never done in my whole life. And I was mortified by cos you work in HR and there's all that expectation, but actually it was the best thing

that I could have done, to just remove that, and within a couple of days of doing that, I had a couple of days of absolute guilt and 'are the team alright?' and everything, and a few texts and 'yes they're fine, they're ok', and then actually it was 'right I can just focus on mum and dad now' and you know, thank God I was able to do that.

Liz: Absolutely. You know you said, and I get what you're saying in this expectation in HR about not, you know, not going off sick, who, where do you think that comes from?

Lorraine: I think it … well I think, I think it comes from the experiences that you have, doesn't it really? That in HR we tend to get involved in the people that have taken the mickey or the disciplinary issues that come out of it, we don't get involved in the, when somebody's genuinely been off sick and then comes back a couple of weeks later and they're ok.

Liz: Yeah, it's a good point.

Lorraine: So they, I think what you see a lot of, what you deal with a lot of are erm, people that you know there's a perception that they've been swinging the lead sometimes. Maybe they have sometimes, maybe they haven't and you know I do a lot of exiting of people out of the business, so, I, I'm sure it is me, I'm sure it is internalised about you can't, you cannot have time off.

Such self-conscious expressions of the emotion of guilt arise from evaluations of one's own moral character (Greenbaum et al., 2019). If so, then Alan and Lorraine's accounts show they see being off sick as a sign of failure that triggers an emotional response. They view it as a failure as they own the policies (i.e. the policies are designed and written by the HR department) which can trigger disciplinary action where absence is sometimes not 'genuine', setting themselves apart from other staff who do not have the same responsibilities (managers are required to implement their policies rather than own them, employees to follow them).

In contemporary culture, individuals are expected to look after themselves and to be ill is viewed non-normative (Peterson and Lupton, 1996). In owning absence management policies, advising line managers how to handle absence with their staff as organisational experts in such, and being involved in the disciplinaries of those who contradict the dominant norm of a duty to be healthy, HR practitioners seem to experience this duty intensely.

I feel empathy with Lorraine and can connect to her narrative. This is one of the reasons why I ask her where she thinks that feeling of not being able to take absence leave comes from; I experienced guilt myself in similar circumstances.

Supporting people – Feeling 'good', 'trapped', 'in the middle' and 'in battle' because of the HR role

One of the common points of difference about HR work that participants reported was the requirement to support both managers and employees but to remain impartial. This led to a range of different emotions depending on how their role was viewed in the organisation, how they positioned themselves, and how they were positioned by others. For example, both Sarah and Ruth are HR directors (though in Sarah's organisation HR does not have a board-level role). Ruth shows an internet image of some scaffolding stating it represents:

> Supporting everybody, you know, you feel like you're holding, you're sometimes, you, there's scaffolding behind everything that's going on. Erm, which is great, I mean that's not a negative, it is, everybody, you know whatever it is people are at your door all the time, whether it's the chief exec or whether it's a paint shop operative or … somebody needs support so you, you feel like you're the scaffolding underneath of it.

She expands on how this feels, stating:

> It's a good feeling that people think that, you know, they come and ask your advice they want you to support them.

Supporting others was something Ruth stated led to her positive feelings about her role as she reported:

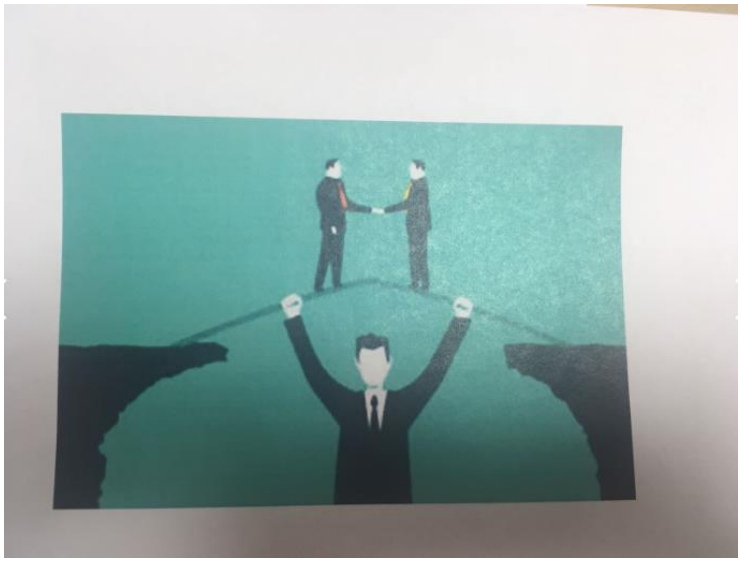
> I love my job. It makes me feel erm, needed. It makes me feel like, you know, […] part of the team and needed as to, to keep it going where it's going.

By contrast, Sarah also reported supporting people, through photograph 4.11 shown overleaf, that she described as 'providing the bridge for people', though this had a more negative implication than Ruth:

> I suppose it's about you sit in the middle a lot of the time and that's, that's, can be very conflicting, because on one side you've got sort of the needs and the wants of the business and on the other side you've got, erm the effect that it has on individuals […] but at the end of the day, yeah you know, the employer will always win because the business has to survive, it is difficult.

Sarah describes the inherent imbalance of power in the employment relationship (Gennard et al., 2016) positioning herself in the middle of employees and the employer. Despite her negative feelings in contrast to those that Ruth reported, both narratives draw attention to their perceived importance of the HR role. For Sarah, the bridge is fundamental to connect employer and employees, though her role as HR director is an indirect one; making direct encounters possible.

Photograph 4.11 – 'Providing the bridge for people'



The photograph shows the heavy weight placed on her in holding up the bridge, placing her in a 'difficult', 'conflicting' and tense position. If she reduces the tension of the trestle structure she embodies, the bridge will collapse with serious consequences for both sides and herself. Ruth's scaffolding also places her in an important position where she is 'the scaffolding underneath' employees and managers, perceiving her needed 'to keep it (the organisation) going where it's going'. Ruth perceives herself 'needed' and on the same side as she feels part of the whole organisation team, whereas Sarah perceives herself in a 'conflicting' position despite holding both sides up. Sarah's conflicting feelings are further highlighted in relation to how she feels about her role, which 'sometimes it can be the best job in the world'. Yet at other times she experiences contrasting emotions:

> At other times, and also actually even, even the nasty stuff, doing the more sort of erm heart-wrenching stuff, doing the, I don't know, the redundancies or the office closures or those sorts of processes, doing them in a compassionate … doing them well, gives you a sense of satisfaction.

That is, the task may be 'nasty' but she perceives herself as compassionate if she handles it well. She explained:

> If you've minimised, minimise the impact because you've managed to relocate them (employees) to other areas of the business. If you've been fair and honest, and actually people have stepped away and said 'actually, that was, you know it was a really traumatic thing to go through but going through it and being, you handling it the way that you did, made it as good as it could be'. That makes you feel good.

She feels ‘good’ when she does ‘bad’ work well – an asymmetrical link (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2012). Lindebaum and Jordan (2014, pp.1039-1040) encourage researchers to study such asymmetry in order to problematize symmetrical assumptions where they suggest:

> ‘Positive emotions are not always linked to positive outcomes (e.g. hubristic pride) and negative emotions are not always linked to negative outcomes (e.g. anger motivating an individual to respond to a social justice problem).’

Thus Sarah’s narrative shows her emotions can be positive or negative, but also a simultaneous experience of both. Doing her job ‘well’ also gives her the ability to defend herself from the negative effects. Yet she has to influence her firm’s partners to do things she perceives as ‘fair’ which she describes as ‘a bit of a battle sometimes’. Despite being HR director, Sarah recounted herself ‘fighting for headcount’; to get sufficient HR resource to do what she perceives is ‘good work’. She tells me she struggles to demonstrate the financial value her department makes (which some senior managers in her organisation see as the only credible benchmark of success), reminiscent of Legge’s (1995) vicious circle. She uses photograph 4.12 of a power cell to describe how she feels, where ‘there’s all this good power trapped […]. You know, it can be, make you feel very, very stressed, erm, at times’.

Photograph 4.12 – ‘There’s all this good power trapped’

At first I struggled to understand the image Sarah showed me:

> Sarah: Yeah (laughing), no I went hunting for that because it's a power cell (laughs).
>
> Liz: A power cell?
>
> Sarah: But it's trapped! Erm, I think that's that feeling of frustration again isn't it, it's, it's …
>
> Liz: When you say it's … how is it? I don't understand how it's trapped.
>
> Sarah: Well it's like, it's in a container …
>
> Liz: Ah right, ok
>
> Sarah: Yeah, yeah, yeah
>
> Liz: Gosh (laughs) you've really thought about this! Ah great.

I found the image hard to relate to and needed Sarah to explain it's meaning to me to help me understand it. She goes on to tell me examples which illustrate her experience, but I do not experience them with her. Her mimetic narrative summarised experience and I listened to it as an academic researcher, feeling pleased that she had taken the time to find images to represent her experiences ahead of our interview, rather than becoming engrossed in her experiences. Sarah and I were students around 15 years ago when we studied for our CIPD qualification together but had since lost touch. It was this past history that influenced how I positioned myself in her interview and how I experienced her account; our relationship was now that of academic researcher and research participant, not fellow students who were also HR practitioners. There is also the possibility that this is why she was more distant from her account than I found other participants to be, where she was typically a witness-protagonist and occasionally a minor character in it (Milostivaya, 2018).

Sarah's bridge image representing 'sitting in the middle' of managers and employees was a metaphor that other participants used to accentuate their difference from non-HR staff. However, some also reported where they 'sided'. For example Jack stated:

> I'm kind of the person in the middle of the union and the organisation but I'm part of the management side […] just generally being the person in the middle, whereas although you're part of management you are trying to be as balanced as you can […]. For me, I'm definitely with the, the management.

Alan shifted positions:

> I guess when you first start in HR, I started very much pro-employee, and probably a little bit, almost a bit union rep I suppose (laughs), but I guess that's, you know, there's obviously the continuum isn't there, and you move

> probably then eventually a little bit too pro-employer and then you have to settle somewhere back in the middle a little bit […]. So now, I'm probably, it's probably now more not so much about who you are for, but about how you manage the risk.

Trying to be 'balanced' and protecting organisational risk made them feel different to both employees and managers; the HR practitioner is neither. Sophie visually illustrated this idea of being neither employee nor manager with a photograph of an internet image from the children's cartoon 'Peppa pig' where HR is 'piggy in the middle':

> You'll have erm employees here (points to a pig at one side), who think erm you're too much for management, you know, you're there to sort of help them do bad things, erm (laughs) or justify their decisions, and then managers who think, erm, you know, sometimes you're there too much for the employee, that you're not letting them deal with an issue and putting things in their way […]. We don't want to be piggy in the middle, be challenging on the other side, we wanna work you know with the employees, with managers, with trade unions (Sophie).

Through her photographic representation it is HR who is in the awkward middle position trying to catch the ball; trying to resolve the differences between employees and management. She has to be different to keep a balance where she 'works with' both but is neither. In summary, these accounts demonstrate that the HR role required participants to be different as they risked criticism if they were viewed 'siding' with one over the other. They were expected to support both but be neither, which could leave them feeling 'conflicted' or 'needed'.

Wanting to scream?

Participant's difference from non-HR staff was also shown as they reported experiencing strong emotions which they could not necessarily/easily express, though others expressed emotions towards them. For example, Elaine described her feelings when her HR 'support' was abused by employees; represented through photograph 4.13 (see overleaf) of a kettle as a mini-drama unfolds in the interview:

> They (employees) make my blood boil sometimes (laughs hysterically). You can't see the steam but it was actually boiling (laughing) […] it's just the some of the situations that you're put in and, and like … with sickness you've got to be really supportive but there's some people that take the mick […] and when you get half like six months full pay, six months half pay people tend to take the mick because they don't have to work for six months so why not … and it's frustrating that as well, cos you want them back in work and colleagues need you back in work and you're trying to explain how you're doing and you

know the supportive side of it or ‘when do you think you’ll be returning?’ ‘Ah not for a long time’ but they’re sat there dolled up to the nine’s, you know, and it’s just really frustrating (laughs).

Photograph 4.13 – ‘They make my blood boil sometimes’

Elaine’s photograph artistically represents her feelings of anger – where she was trying to show the steam coming out of the kettle. The reporting of anger contrasts with the hysterical laughter in the interview as she recounts her experience, a possible way of mimicking her anger without expressing it towards me. She becomes calmer as she summarizes the absence policy rules playing herself in conversation with the employees she imagines are ‘taking the mick’, ‘dolled up to the nines’ and playing characters themselves. The anger and frustration she reports feeling in the workplace is performed in the interview as a sitcom. As her audience I laugh along and enjoy the performance.

Though Elaine feels angry that her support is abused, she does not express her anger towards those whom she perceives ‘take the mick’. It is her duty to support employees who are absent from work, but she experiences tension as they are treated as resources and the policy sets the parameters for ‘support’, dictating how she should act/what support she can offer. This tension results in her experiencing

anger and frustration simultaneously; neither which are shown to employees as she neutrally asks them ‘when do you think you’ll be returning?’

Other participants reported having to conceal their emotions because they were in an HR role. For example:

> A lot of the time you just gotta kind of zip it, zip it up […] and if you’re in HR and you’re not doing that then you shouldn’t be in HR (Sophie).
>
> You just kind of have to park that (your emotions) and put it aside and, you know, think, think blank kind of face if you like (Natalie).

Lorraine showed an image of an emoji with a swearing face and stated:

> That’s me, getting quite frustrated but learning to just, shut up sometimes (laughs) […]. Some battles I can try and fight and influence, some battles are just, you just have to smile sweetly and get on with it.

Anna showed photograph 4.14 of a self-drawing which represented her feelings that she did not express to others but also struggled to describe:

Photograph 4.14 – ‘Is there an emotion called aaggghh?’

> Anna: I think that’s just a bit ‘aaaaghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!’ (laughing) and that can be for all sorts of reasons because like ‘why or how do you think that’s appropriate to speak to me like that?’ It could be ‘aaghhh, why are you being such a moron?’ (Laughs).
>
> Liz: Yeah, yeah
>
> Anna: Like ‘what’s wrong with you?’ Erm, it could be ‘ahhhhgh, I’ve got too much work to do’, (laughing) thank God, I don’t know where to start. Ah, a million reasons why I could just be like (laughing)

Liz: So just to clarify, it's you … (laughing), it's a self-portrait? (Laughing) Sort of … ?

Anna: Hopefully I don't have spikey hair (laughs) like that (laughs hard)

Liz: No, although you have drawn your hair on end (laughs)

Anna: Yeah I think that's probably why, cos I'm like (high pitched squeal) heeeeeeeeeeeeeeemmmmmm!

Liz: Yeah

Anna: Like this is ridiculous … ly … why? (Laughs)

Liz: Yeah, so what's the emotion you were trying to draw?

Anna: Errrr … ooowww, what would I word it as … I don't even know. Is there an emotion called aaggghh! (Laughs)

Liz: So I think, tell me, correct me if I'm wrong. So in your mouth … ?

Anna: That is my, just tongue

Liz: Oh!

Anna: It's supposed to be your mouth like really wide open going 'aaaaaaghhhhhhhhhh'

Liz: I thought it was a heart! (Laughs)

Anna: No … (Laughs)

Anna's inability to find the words to describe her emotions is embodied in both her drawing of herself and the phrases and wordless sounds (such as 'aaghhh') that she uses to represent feelings she does not label. Not labelling them makes her account dramatic, one that I co-narrate with her through our combined laughter and dialogue. As I ask questions and comment/joke about her self-portrait, I contribute ideas about her hair standing on end and her tongue being a heart. The laughter between us gets louder as she makes more sounds representing her imagined feelings emanating from her explanation of the drawing of her open mouth. The sounds she makes to represent emotions she cannot describe (or does not want to say as they are strong emotions) draw me further into the drama and our shared laughter becomes hysterical. The sounds also have the effect of helping me better understand the feelings she enacts in the interview (Dykhoff, 2012). We both seem to enjoy the dialogue as we quip responsively back and forth. She does not need to use words to label how she feels. We are two HR practitioners in this drama and there is an understanding between us that I will know intuitively what is meant.

Her speech then slows and a sigh signals a change of tone where she becomes serious, posing 'why' questions to an imaginary other:

> Like 'why are we going over this issue again?', or 'why can we not move forward with this issue?' or … (sighs) 'why are you speaking to me like that?' 'Why are you coming to me, it's actually nothing to do with me, you need to go to that person?' Or … I think a lot of it, you are like I was saying before, you are a conduit for the information so people do come to you but actually it isn't really anything to do with you, so, but they want *you* to resolve it […]. And erm and, sometimes that's frustrating because I get a lot of … ah 'can you look at this?' 'Can you do that?'… But 'why don't you just email that person yourself?' 'Why are you emailing *me* to email *them*, to get back to *me*, to get back to *you*?' (Laughs).

The way she narrates her account here suggests agitation, the 'why?' questions fired like a petulant child. I listen and do not interrupt. I let her get to the end, to release the frustration, as if she has not had an opportunity to say this to anyone else who might understand/listen to her. Laughter at the end of her 'rant' enables her to be critical of ways of working, where she is expected to be a 'conduit'. She articulates the incongruity of the situation, that perceiving herself messenger for others is not what she believes should happen. By emphasising the words 'them', 'me' and 'you' she highlights the involvement of too many people, another incongruous situation, which is sarcastic when accompanied with laughter. Being in an HR role means she cannot say how she feels or there are no words to describe her feelings. Yet as she reports to me here and earlier in her interview, non-HR staff *do* express their strong emotions such as anger towards her and 'think it is appropriate to speak to me like that'. Because she is different to them (by being HR) she feels expected to keep her emotions at bay.

In summary, the narrative we're different was constructed by participants from a broad range of workplace experiences, individualised contexts, and connections between various events. However, what was common across participants' accounts was how holding an HR role set them apart from non-HR staff through their expertise in people management, the policies they were responsible for, and their organisational positioning where they were neither employee nor manager. The emotions generated as a result of this difference were broad-ranging, experienced as a mix of conflicting emotions; both positive and negative. Having to be balanced and 'in the middle' of employees and managers required them to be different. I close

this section with Sarah's summary of how it feels to work in HR, chosen as it encapsulates other participants' perspectives:

> It's such a rollercoaster and I think that's, that's so tiring because one minute it's, it's, you're writing a new strategy and it's exciting or there's a change and there's, you have to respond to it […] but the next minute you'll have a conversation with someone and it'll just and, you know, something that they want to do which is so ridiculous and you just think 'really?' And that's really frustrating, and it's just a complete rollercoaster […] trying to keep everybody happy and in balance.

In this chapter I have presented three narratives 'no-one likes us', 'I'd hate your job' and we're different which bring to life how study participants narrated their emotional experiences of working in HR. The first narrative demonstrated the emotions experienced from doing work where they perceived themselves disliked and mistrusted which could leave them feeling lonely and sad. Some participants used dark characterisations of themselves to bring this narrative to life, alongside contrasting laughter and self-mockery; a possible way of defending themselves from the emotionally painful situations they recounted. The second narrative illustrated that they did work that others told them they did not wish to do themselves; handling others' toxic emotions and reporting that the experience of doing so could be difficult, draining or damaging. The final narrative demonstrated how the nature of HR work made them feel different to those not in HR roles. The role required them to take middle positions between managers and employees, which left them feeling ambivalent, but to keep the balance between the two meant they could be neither themselves. There was a mismatch between their perceived expertise in people management and the value managers placed on it, where their advice could be over-ruled/ignored (advice participants did not always follow for themselves). The struggles they experienced resulted in them concealing their own strong emotions from others.

In summary, it is not surprising that the overall emotional tone emanating from this narrative was negatively balanced; though their individual experiences of emotions were nuanced and not easily articulated using emotion-labels. Participants reported being in emotionally difficult, tense positions as a result of the requirements of HR work, despite some reporting enjoying the role or feeling 'good' about doing difficult work well. This therefore begs the question, how did they cope with the job? In the

following chapter I present two further narratives ‘protecting ourselves’ and ‘doing repair work’ where I set out how participants navigated/coped with their experiences.

Chapter 5 - Findings (2): Navigating emotionally demanding work

Thus far my findings illustrate three key points. First, participants were required to do work that left them feeling disliked and lonely. Second, they carried out some tasks that were unenvied by others which they experienced as difficult or draining. Third, they held a role which required them to be in the middle of managers and employees which meant they have to be 'different' as they are neither manager nor employee, leaving them experiencing mixed emotions and feeling frustrated. These three narratives show how participants experienced their work; uncovering their subjective experiences of emotion. In this second findings chapter I set out the two final narratives 'protecting ourselves' and 'doing repair work' which demonstrate how participants navigated or coped with those experiences. Protecting ourselves is about the ways participants reported coping with the emotionally demanding nature of their work; how they protected themselves from 'the emotional consequences of adversity' (Cramer, 1998, p.920). The narrative doing repair work accentuates the tensions between participants 'true' feelings about their work and not wanting to give that impression in their interview, where three different 'faces' conflicted with each other (their professional/HR face, their personal face and that which they had visually represented through their photographs). I next illustrate both narratives and draw attention to the mimetic and diegetic features of participants' accounts.

Protecting ourselves

The fourth narrative, protecting ourselves, demonstrates the ways participants coped with the emotionally demanding nature of HR work. Participants 'managed' their emotions by concealing them in the workplace in front of non-HR staff but expressed their emotions in private places, either when they were alone or with each other. They reported what they did to look after themselves (as no-one else thought to) and each other, using emotion-focussed coping strategies such as social support with HR peers, and positive appraisal (Folkman et al., 1986). This narrative is important to the secondary research question; what approaches do HR practitioners take when navigating emotionally demanding work?

I begin this section by illustrating a sub-narrative of protecting ourselves; 'becoming robots' which I identified across participants' accounts. I then provide examples of self and team-care, the emotion-focussed coping strategies used by participants. I weave longer examples through this section from Janet and Lorraine's accounts

which demonstrate similarities with and differences from other participants' experiences, but both provide rich illustration of the protecting ourselves narrative. I conclude with Catherine's account of dismissing an employee where I use the features of her mimetic and diegetic narrative to draw attention to the possibility that the way she tells her narrative in the interview is in itself a type of self-protection (from the serious nature of the task she reports on).

Becoming robots

Sarah and Janet observed how other HR practitioners (not themselves) were devoid of emotion, robot-like:

> I've met people in HR who … will walk into a room and sack someone off and not give a damn about it. Erm, and if, if, a manager turns around and goes, 'actually I want that person out of the building' and they go 'ok, fine, well I'll just go and do it now, that's fine'. Erm and they won't sit there and go, 'well why? They've been here ten years, they've been great'. You know, what's … they won't sort of argue back or if it's the wrong decision […]. I'm not sure they're actually they're the best person to do it because actually you don't have that sort of level of … of understanding or compassion or anything else (Sarah).

> I think somehow HR, with the technology, everything's online, all of these different modes of working and all the rest of it, we're actually taking the emotions *out* of people, so that some of the HR people, they become like robots (Janet).

Where Sarah and Janet observe these behaviours in others, Sophie, Natalie and other participants described their experiences of having to be robot-like, 'hard' and unemotional. Sophie, for example, spoke of the need to be 'thick skinned':

> I think one of the things that you definitely have to be is quite thick skinned I would say, which in some ways doesn't align maybe with some of the softer side of, as managers see as the softer side, you know the empathy obviously you have to have that, but you also have to, I think to a certain extent, yes you have to accept that that is, if you can't accept that, that you will get criticism from both sides.

The 'thick skinned' HR practitioner also has to be 'cold-hearted':

> I think you get quite hard faced working in HR and … a bit cold-hearted. You kind of have to remove that emotion, albeit I'm not a, an oversensitive person but I, I still feel for the individual. Erm, but you just kind of have to park that and put it aside and, you know, think, think blank kind of face if you like (Natalie).

Emotions have to be hidden behind a ‘blank kind of face’. Natalie explained this was necessary to cope with difficult conversations she was required to have with employees. This professional face is perhaps a ‘protective shield’ (Bolton, 2001, p.92) but it is also one deemed necessary because the HR practitioner should not show that they sympathise with staff. They become the HR role rather than a person. This is not an unambiguous position: Sophie perceives she should be tough, but managers want her to be soft. She should express empathy but at the same time hide it.

They are robots who follow policies and procedures:

> I think we’re quite supportive in our policies, even in like disciplinaries and things like that. So sickness we’re very supportive cos we give all that sick pay and erm we have two stages in the process (Elaine).

The policy dictates the support they give, for example when dealing with staff who are long-term sick:

> You’re having these meetings where you know that all you’re gonna be saying is ‘ok well you’ve been to see occupational health and they’ve said you’re not fit to come back, your GP’s said you’re not fit to come back, erm, let us meet again in four weeks’ and it’s, it’s almost ticking a box because that’s what the policy says we have to do, meet them every four weeks (Natalie).

As robots, they are programmed to follow scripts, albeit scripts they write themselves for themselves:

> I write my script, I’ve got the vacancy bulletin printed out, I’ve got my redundancy policy printed out, I’ve got their figures printed out, and I just kind of … I go in, and, and almost a bit robotic I guess (Natalie).

Or for line managers:

> I’ve just been writing a script now for a manager where we’ve basically got to meet with somebody who’s really poorly and long-term sick (Natalie).
>
> When I first came […] you would be writing scripts for them (line managers), because there were things that they couldn’t (respond to) […] they don’t have that in the script so you’d have to write it in (Sophie).

Deviation is required if the organisation (not staff) needs protection:

> Sometimes the, the policy’s there for the times that you need it, but then you need to be able to break the rules sometimes, again if it’s in the best interests of the organisation (Catherine).

This scripted and robotic work is devoid of emotion and fulfils a legal duty to mitigate organisational risk (Lyncheski, 1995). Employees are expected to conform to the script.

This narrative of 'becoming robots' describes people following scripted performances in which compassion or care disappears as it becomes 'over routinized and rationalized' (Simpson, Clegg and Pitsis, 2014, p.355), or not in the organisation's best interest. They conform to Fineman's (1993, p.19) description of emotion management:

> 'Many professional workers […] are paid for their skill in emotion management. They are to look serious, understanding, controlled, cool, empathetic and so forth with their clients or patients. The feeling rules are implicit in their professional "discipline" (an apt term) – "rational", "scientific", "caring", "objective". Benign detachment disguises, and defends against, any private feelings of pain, despair, fear, attraction, revulsion or love; feelings which would otherwise interfere with the professional relationship'.

They disguise and defend against their private feelings and in doing so protect themselves from possible emotional harm. Though they rationalized care for others, when it came to themselves participants described how they cared for themselves in ways that were not scripted or routinized, something they reported was their own responsibility as being the ones responsible for others' welfare; their personal welfare was overlooked (Rivers, 2019).

Self and team-care

Interviewees reported making conscious efforts to regulate their internal feelings. For example, in response to situations that 'make her blood boil' Elaine stated:

> But I have to, I have to breathe and like mindfulness sessions and all, all that and just slow your breathing and things […]. I take myself away from the situation once I've been able to deal with it and just go for a little walk, just cool down a bit […]. I can stop myself (getting angry) though, so I'm quite good at sort of taking a step back and thinking 'oh they must be feeling exactly the same' cos of the situation or whatever so you have to step back and breathe. Yeah. And hopefully I don't show it (laughs).

In retelling the efforts she makes to regulate her anger, Elaine laughs as if to reinforce to me that she should not show her emotions to others, maintaining her professional face in the interview with the researcher.

Alan also made conscious efforts in response to stressful situations:

> So a few ways I've tried rationalise things, erm logically and just sort of try and sort of have, have five minutes with myself or I'll walk round the garden quite often and just take a bit of time just to compose, and sometimes you come back from a particularly stressful meeting, you just need a minute … you just need to just, blow off some steam. I've got very supportive colleagues, you know erm, I'm quite close to the finance manager because we deal with payroll a lot, so we quite often will, will, will sort of use each other I suppose.

Both Elaine and Alan put physical and emotional space between themselves and difficult work issues. They use their bodies to try to 'rationalise' their emotions, where they 'step back and breathe', take short walks and 'blow off steam'. Elaine imagines herself in the position of the emotional other as a way of empathising. Alan uses his actual (not imagined) relationship with the finance manager for support. He reports that as a lone HR manager he also 'vents' with HR peers in other organisations. His coping mechanisms also extended away from the workplace by doing exercise and playing in a brass band to 'take your mind off things'. This is seen in more depth in his discussion about the meaning of photograph 5.1 of his home breakfast table:

Photograph 5.1 – 'Being kind to yourself a little bit'

> Alan: And it's just kind of being kind to yourself a little bit. So that was just, again it's a point in time when you think, actually this is nice to be able to do

this cos some people can't do this. You know, some people start really, really early, some people just go into work and don't, don't kind of take care of themselves. So it was a moment where I thought, actually, so this is important you need to look after yourself. Cos if I don't look after myself there's no-one else that's gonna do that […].

Liz: So is that advice that you give to other people?

Alan: Yeah, I probably don't follow it often enough for myself (laughs).

By not often following his wellbeing advice, being expected to support others' wellbeing could be overwhelming. This was also illustrated by Alan, Natalie and Anna who described how handling others' emotions as a result of difficult meetings they were required to instigate could have a negative emotional impact on themselves:

> I'd had erm, erm a bit of a week the other week and I had somebody come to me and say 'actually can I, can I have five minutes?' and you know damn well it's never five minutes, you know you're going to be at least half an hour, and there's possibly gonna be tears and all the other bits and pieces. And I just said 'do you know what, actually right now I can't do that'. So I was trying to be kind to myself. It was the first time I've ever had to do it. Erm … but it was just because of some very specific circumstances (Alan).
>
> As you're aware, a lot of the meetings that we can have erm, are of a negative nature so ultimately meetings can result in tears and therefore we provide tissues to members of staff, and managers, and us sometimes (laughs) you know (Natalie). (Photograph 5.2)

Photograph 5.2 – 'Meetings can result in tears'

> Obviously you're dealing with other people's emotions and sometimes a lot of the situations that you come across are quite upsetting, so erm it can be that side of it, being there to support an employee going through something difficult to advise, to comfort. Also I think quite often it feels like other people don't think you're a person, (laughs) and you don't have *any* emotions … at all. So they feel like they can speak to you how they want and behave towards you however they want. I think sometimes you just feel like *you* need a tissue! (Laughs) (Anna). (Photograph 5.3)

Photograph 5.3 – 'Sometimes you just feel like you need a tissue'

Not only were they required to handle others' emotional pain but they experienced strong emotions themselves. Situations could be 'upsetting' and lead to tears. In Anna's case her emotions are unacknowledged by others to the extent that she literally feels dehumanised 'I think quite often it feels like other people don't think you're a person'. Both Natalie and Anna gently laugh as they report sometimes needing tissues; a possible way of protecting themselves in the interview from recounting sadness. Natalie explicitly acknowledges the shared understanding between us about the negative orientation of some HR meetings stating 'as you're aware' on beginning her sentence. I empathise with them (positioned as fellow HR practitioner) in understanding why they might need tissues. These examples illustrate that despite the robotic unemotional performances participants were required to give, underneath the hard faces they are emotional human beings.

Team-care

Participants who were part of an HR team described how they supported each other as they navigated emotionally challenging work, what I refer to as 'team-care'

(Rivers, 2019). Team-care rarely extended outside the HR department due to the confidential nature of their work and a desire to be perceived as 'professional'; i.e. participants concealed their emotions from non-HR staff so not to be perceived unprofessional. Team-care was exemplified by shared cups of tea, by having 'a bit of a giggle', 'letting off steam' and using positive self-talk with each other:

> What keeps me sane in this job is (HR co-worker) and I are both tea drinkers and we have two or three brews and when things are getting a bit … we have a brew, erm so that's important to me, teamwork's important to me (Janet).
>
> We're all very ultra-professional on the face of it, but actually there are people in your team that you get on with really well and we do have a bit of a giggle, erm, and you know we go out socially here occasionally and, and it's nice isn't it because they (HR team) need the support, they need to be able to let off steam with people, with somebody that they can trust to do that (Lorraine).
>
> We want to be good at our jobs, we want to do a good job, we want to be positive, so to try and keep doing that in an environment that doesn't really want that, can be … so it can be both, it can be right 'come on we're gonna, let's not let this get to us, let's not let it get us down' and it's like 'we've got a good way of working, we're gonna be positive, we're gonna make a difference, we're gonna change things'. But then it can be like 'ooh we're on our little island; we've got no friends' (laughing) (Anna).

Sarah's HR team created an informal space to vent with each other which they labelled the 'mindfulness mantelpiece'. This originated from a mental health awareness programme where her team placed a sofa and chairs around a makeshift fireplace in the open-plan HR office where they could sit and share the day's events. She states her team 'have to' support each other as they cannot share confidences with colleagues outside of the HR function. As we conduct our interview in her office in the HR department, she shows me the mantelpiece (complete with a team Christmas photograph sitting on top of it) which is situated outside Sarah's individual office. It mimics a hearth in the home. This representation is in sharp contrast to Anna's example of positive team talk with her boss where they are still left lonely and isolated on their island despite having each other.

Team-care was also illustrated by Lorraine as a way of coping with a difficult experience. She recounted a time when she and her HR colleagues were required to close down a business, showing me a photograph that had been taken at the time (where she had edited the photograph to show herself but had cropped out her colleagues to bring to the interview):

> Lorraine: So that, that photograph is (laughs) very inappropriate and unprofessionally, that is the last day that we were all employed by (company name). So we'd been through, possibly the hardest year I've ever been through in my working career, and we'd basically, there's a few of us, stood in a line and we'd had these t-shirts printed. Do you know what that stands for? (Points to logo on t-shirt D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F.)
>
> Liz: No
>
> Lorraine: (laughs) Do I look like I give a …
>
> Liz: Oh right, ok!
>
> Lorraine: (laughing) So …
>
> Liz: (laughing) I was thinking 'day in the life of' I was thinking all these corporate jargon things, right ok.
>
> Lorraine: No, no, and it, so it's quite unprofessional but we actually bought those on the last day in the office
>
> Liz: Right
>
> Lorraine: Which was fine, because every single person in the office had been made redundant at this point.

The acronym D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F. is boldly emblazoned across her chest on a white t-shirt, printed in black capital letters. It is not a subtle statement, unless you do not know what it means. Lorraine is smiling and has her arms around two HR colleagues on either side of her. In contrast to what is shown, a smiling face, she tells me she was 'absolutely exhausted in that picture, I am absolutely exhausted' from making all the employees in the organisation redundant during a merger and acquisition whilst also facing redundancy herself.

Lorraine was the lead HR practitioner during consultation meetings with other organisational employees, including elected representatives who were her HR colleagues. She describes the experience as 'absolutely horrendous' with no support from the merging organisation or its leadership team, on whose behalf she was required to implement the redundancies:

> I always swore that I would never manage a consultation process the way that had been, cos it felt like, I would never expect somebody else to have to make themselves redundant.

She recalls how she experienced the process where she also had to make other HR practitioners redundant:

> We were working incredibly long hours, and there was almost a small team that worked with me […] and the other HR people almost had the luxury of,

> their businesses were all winding down and they had nothing else to do […] but focus on their own redundancy. We had no time to focus on us being made redundant and deal with that emotionally, we just had to get on and do it for everybody else. It was incredibly hard, incredibly hard.

I ask whose idea it was to wear the t-shirts:

> It was just a phrase we used to say. By the end we'd got to a point where it was just like 'well, what are you going to do, sack us?' We'd already been sacked so, and don't get me wrong we were, we were professionals, but it was just that was our little release I suppose it just, you know and don't get me wrong, you don't go around with it in parading around in the office (laughing) but we did put them on in terms of, we did have them done for the photograph. That's our little rebellion I suppose as well (laughs).

She emphasises her awareness that wearing the t-shirts may not be deemed appropriate behaviour by other staff. However, she rationalises there was minimal risk attached to their 'little rebellion'. If the t-shirts were only worn for the photograph marking their final day of employment, their rebellion was invisible (assuming no-one else viewed them). The senior management had 'already taken their deals and dipped out' but her HR team had to 'get on and do it for everybody else'.

What is represented through the photograph is not the 'absolutely horrendous' experience but a story of camaraderie. Lorraine's team supported each other during this 'incredibly hard' experience, where they not only had to deal with consultation meetings and carry out the process of ending employment, but faced criticism from other HR staff who she tells me 'pasted' them for not answering their queries quickly enough. They use/say the D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F. acronym to help them get through the experience, an experience significant enough to have it printed on t-shirts and smile while someone takes a picture of them wearing them. Yet the photograph also elicits her description of an emotionally difficult time, one which evoked strong and painful memories for me of my own involvement in a business closure. I do not need her to explain this any further (I know what the process entails) and do not want to revisit my own experiences/feelings. As she narrates her experience I do not experience it with her (or at least I try to not relate it back to my own experiences). I share no experience back with her and protect myself in doing so, an occasion during my fieldwork when I remain positioned as an academic researcher, trying to understand why she would photograph the painful experience like a souvenir. In acknowledging that I withhold experience and emotional expression here, there is the possibility this

provides further insights into how the self is protected during difficult emotional experiences; that others might do the same?

Whereas Lorraine printed her feelings on a t-shirt, other participants expressed their emotions in private places, one of whom was Janet whose narrative I explore in detail next. Unlike other participants, Janet was a temporary HR worker, a status she used to cope with her work by being an 'observer'.

'I just let it flow over me' and hidden/private spaces

Janet is a semi-retired temporary HR advisor. She protects herself from harmful emotions through the very nature of being a temporary worker, which enables her to 'cope with it (HR work) by being an observer, I just observe'. When she finishes each temporary assignment she shares her view of the organisation with 'them' (management):

> Because in every business I tell them what I think when I leave, in a nice way, I usually do my cultural map and tell them … I do all that kind of thing erm and just say 'you know this where, you, this is what it's like working here', but people have got to want to change and many of them don't.

This is the only formal way she recounts sharing her feelings about her work with others - when about to leave the organisation, when any consequences from her feedback is minimised. Elsewhere in her interview she reports expressing her 'true' feelings but these are in hidden informal spaces where she can go to gossip, where she uses the temporality of her role and existing relationships to leverage information:

> I talk to people at the coffee machine, I find out all sorts that's going on. Toilets, toilets, cos (HR co-worker) says 'how do you know that?' 'Cos so and so told me in the toilet' I thought, and when you tell people that you see, I'm naughty really, when I said to that woman 'I'm only a temp', to be fair when you say that to them and you get all this stuff. There's one woman that works there and I know her of old […]. She says to me (mimicking voice) 'Hey Janet we'll have a coffee sometime, the stuff I could tell you'. I thought, I bet, I bet (laughs) and some of it I've worked out for myself already (laughs).

The way Janet narrates her account mimics the way she reports gossiping in hidden organisational spaces; using mimicking voices where she whispers dialogue with her HR co-worker and a staff member offering information over a coffee. The interview is mimetic of her experience. She judges her own behaviour unacceptable in saying 'I'm naughty really' where she perceives misbehaviour is in abusing her temporary

worker status to elicit information that would not be shared if she were a permanent HR staff member.

I noted in my field notes that 'I felt the interview had a real deepness about it, the most so far, maybe this was because of her experience' and that I 'got lost in the interview'. By this I meant I was engrossed in her account. Her interview was a drama I got lost in and experienced with her. Her photographs appeared carefully selected to illustrate the prepared story she wanted to tell me as she follows them in the order they were taken (other participants said there was no order and talked about each one in a more random, unconnected way, where connections were sometimes vocalised as they were all laid out in front of them at the end of the interview). The first half of her interview was narrated in a serious and deliberate way when she tells me some dark stories about her HR past; how she worked with and blew the whistle on a bully, another where she suspects confidential HR files were deliberately accessed without her authorisation and is later made redundant, and another where she returned from holiday to find a replacement HR manager had 'terminated' the employment of someone who was terminally ill; a case that she reports more sensitively 'managing' before taking leave. The second half of her narrative is livelier, with more laughter and joking where she recounts various stories which illustrate how she copes with HR work; a defensive coping strategy because 'the emotions of being an HR person is self-survival and acceptance of the crap really' where:

> I just let it flow over me […] because how I cope with my emotions in my job is *so* different to when I first started as a young person […]. I've experienced different things in different organisations and it's actually helped me to build up enormous resilience. Whereas if I'd stayed somewhere for 20 years, you perhaps become cynical. Now I just go in there, and that's why I quite like the temping role. Because I think, bring it on.

This idea of painful emotions 'flowing over her' or not affecting her are because she has 'enormous resilience'. She states 'throw a dart at me and it will just bounce off' and shows me a photograph of a Buddha statue as she tells me she practices yoga, meditation and mindfulness. Yet her defensive armour also seems represented by the very first photograph she shows me, a three quarter length shot of her smiling wearing a hard hat, steel toe capped boots and high visibility jacket on a visit with apprentices to a power station; a time she reports feeling happy from 'making a

difference' but a possible material manifestation of what she seems to need in order to endure her job.

She continues to play characters of both her own and others' voices in her narrative, drawing me further into the drama she narrates, as I contribute with my own lines, such as when she and her co-worker are asked to follow up missed 'clocking's' following a 'snow day':

> Janet: […] you know, I went to ask a woman the other day where 'do you know you had a missed clocking on such and such?', and she turned round and said (in mimicking croaky voice) 'haven't you got anything better to do other than check-up whether I've clocked in?' And then I thought, do you know you have a point, and I said (said in matter of fact way) 'it's a procedure here and I'm a temp'.
>
> Liz: Oh, ok (laughing).
>
> Janet: So I said, which was a little bit fudging it, and after I walked away I thought 'oh you shouldn't have said that', but I, I walk, I didn't want to say to her, 'no if it were down to me I wouldn't be telling you, you know', if it were down to me I wouldn't be bothering about this.
>
> Liz: So do you think if, if you were permanent, or would … ?
>
> Janet: I'd go to the MD and say (loud voice, defiantly) 'it's a load of baloney'… in a nice way […]. But the cumbersome practices mean that we spend hours doing things that are worthless, and I, (HR co-worker) got quite frustrated the other day when we were trawling through this stuff and I said to her 'look' I said 'don't worry about it, I reckon they've spent about 500 quid on us checking the snow things (clocking's), if they want to waste their money like that …', 'that was 500 pound, we could have got pizzas in for everybody'
>
> Liz: Yeah, yeah absolutely.
>
> Janet: Everybody who's come into work today in this snow, do you know what, we're gonna send out for some pizzas, that would have been, a far better message.
>
> Liz: Of course, than 'we're checking up on you to see if you're …'
>
> Janet: Yeah, well yeah, erm and I, and I said to her 'don't worry if they want me to mop the canteen floor I will but I …' (Laughs lots).
>
> Liz: (laughs lots)

I enjoy listening to the stories she narrates to me, sometimes they make me laugh (such as her self-denigrating line above about mopping the canteen floor), and others draw me into her narrative to empathise with her. Her diegetic narrative is

strong. I also connect with what she says, her mimetic narrative resonates with me, and I find her criticism of her organisation's HR practices refreshing. She is not trying to paint a positive picture of HR work, one that she thinks an academic researcher and HR lecturer will want to hear. She 'tells it how it is' for her; something perhaps that is easier because she is a temporary worker and because we have a good rapport and become two HR practitioners talking.

Other participants also reported expressing emotions in hidden spaces, that Fineman (2003) calls 'emotionalized zones'. For example, Sarah reports:

> So she (the director of learning and development) often has similar things whereby, you know, various bits and pieces happen that are very frustrating, so we usually say, we used to go to her training cupboard actually (laughs). It was the *only* place in this *entire* building that didn't have any mirrors or windows, so people couldn't see you in, so we used to, we used to say 'meet you in the training cupboard in twenty minutes' (laughing).

This contrasts with Sarah's perception I shared in the 'no-one likes us' narrative of how others view her, where she again refers to 'cupboards' as places of hiding, but this time used by people hiding from her. Catherine reported crying as she drove home from the 'naughty site' where 'I'll admit I've driven home in tears of frustration'. Not something I might reveal to someone I have just met, but illustrates the rapport we have developed during our interview. She describes her home office, shown in photograph 5.4 with her 'office squad' of pets, as her 'sort of happy place'.

Photograph 5.4 – 'My sort of happy place'

> If you have had a particularly bad day, it's nice to know that you've got that to come home to, that they are there, they're (her pets) not going to give you any gip … they're not gonna … because some people don't realise how difficult it can be to switch off, because HR is a caring role in its, in its core, to be supportive, whether it's of the individuals or the business, and to have that sort of integrity and that caring challenged all the time, like you would never say to a nurse, 'you're vile, you're horrible, de, de, de, de, derr' but that kind of seems to be what happens.

Her words represent someone who perceives themselves reviled as she recounts what staff at the 'naughty site' say to her. She sings the wordless words 'de, de, de, de, derr', re-enacting what she perceives as their playground-like behaviour towards her as a performance in the interview. She contrasts her pets with her opponents 'they're not going to give you any gip (make me feel like vomiting)', an inference about the strength of her ill-feeling against them. Yet the photograph of her home office is introduced with the words 'by contrast' to show a more likeable version of herself (than the 'hatchet person' shared in the first narrative). Her office is decorated like a beach hut; far removed from the taunts of the school playground. Here she is surrounded by her supporters, her pets and photographs of friends and family that she tells me are outside the frame of the photograph. The 'office squad' assigned to the task of keeping her safe are watched over by a guardian angel figurine, another photograph she shares with me to represent her feelings in the place where she can 'switch off' from being HR business partner and be Catherine.

I finish this section with a further excerpt from Catherine's interview, chosen as it makes light of the task of ending employment and is notable because of the way it is narrated. I will suggest that it is through her performance of this mini-drama in the interview (a comedy) that Catherine protects herself from the darker 'realities' of her work; she states earlier in her interview that she uses humour/jokes in the workplace to relieve tension which is 'kind of my way'. She was not the only participant to state this. For example, Natalie reported having to face anger from others where 'sometimes we (HR) can get spoken and quite … but I sometimes do that, you know, you kind of cover up with a laughter, because if you don't laugh you'll cry'. The passage below encapsulates many elements of this narrative; the scripted work of following processes/procedures of 'becoming robots', the requirement to do HR work that is confidential and therefore difficult to 'off load' to others, and how she expresses emotions that have been concealed in the privacy of her home office.

Making difficult work seem funny … to protect myself?

I have provided various examples of drama in Catherine's narrative. The crescendo is an incident she narrates towards the end of our interview. It begins in the way that a stand-up comedian would start to tell a joke, akin to 'so, let me tell you about a friend of mine'. The content is in bleak contrast to the laughter she expresses; a story about ending a receptionist's employment:

> Catherine: So erm, I was on the phone, friend of mine, erm, erm is working not far from me and sometimes sneaks, well not sneaks out of work, but on his dinner hour, comes and sits at my house for half an hour just to get away, and erm, I was on the phone and erm, erm … I happened to be talking to a, a colleague, and he just sort of come down the side of the house and into my little hut, sat on the sofa and my desk's sort of here (points to photograph) and I'm working away at my desk and so I'm on the phone. So I'm saying 'oh yeah', to the people services, the shared service centre 'we need to get this letter out, we need to do that, we need to do that, and yeah no we need to just part company with her now, this person I'm terminating, de, de, de, de, de' and erm … he'd managed to, and I don't tell, even though he doesn't work in that industry, he doesn't know anybody that I know, there's nobody that he can really tell, even if I was sharing things, but I erm I, I don't tell them sort of details, but for whatever reason he just went 'oooh is that that receptionist, is she gonna go?' And eventually I was like 'shut up!' (Laughing)
>
> Liz: (laughing lots)
>
> Catherine: Shut up!
>
> Liz: (laughing)
>
> Catherine: Shut up! (Said quietly) (Laughing) You've pieced too many things together. That concerns me. I'm telling you nothing, I'm telling you nothing now (laughing).
>
> Liz: Brilliant
>
> Catherine: But yeah but he was like 'oh yes, is she going, is she going, is she going?' He's never met her, doesn't know anything about her! (Laughing) But he's like 'oh that's great'. I'm like 'you work fer't dole office, you see more, you see more trouble than I do on a day-to-day basis'.
>
> Liz: Yeah, yeah (laughing)
>
> Catherine: You've got security guards in your office (laughing)
>
> Liz: Yeah (laughing)

Catherine's mini-drama has a cast of five; herself, the employee being 'terminated' (the receptionist), the people services HR colleague on the telephone, her friend who

works at the job centre and myself. The first part of her narrative sets the scene. She gives the necessary details to help me (her audience) understand, at which point she is an external narrator looking in on her story. She uses the photograph of her home office as a prop to show where she and her friend were sat in relation to each other – pointing out the physical staging so I can re-live the experience with her; take myself into the photograph and become one of the cast. Then the action begins as she re-enacts the telephone call with people services where she plays herself, the HR business partner, where she reduces the ending of employment to an administrative task; letters are to be sent and tasks to be done to 'just part company with her now'. The words of the people services colleague on the other end of the telephone are not recounted but I assume Catherine's request to dismiss the receptionist is questioned as she responds stating 'no, we need to just part company with her now'. I imagine the people services colleague questioning whether the receptionist should be given another chance, what the organisational risk is? Catherine masks the details of the actual words she says by reducing them to the wordless words 'de de de de de'; either she thinks they do not need saying between us as I know what this administration involves, or she does not think they are important details. The dismissal/administrative process and her retelling of it is robotic and unemotional. Her friend, who has been quietly sitting in her office listening to her telephone conversation, then makes his verbal entrance to the scene stating in an excited, gossipy voice 'oooh is that that receptionist, is she gonna go?' Emotion enters the scene.

Catherine does not recount what was said immediately afterwards between them but then replays her line with 'eventually I was like "shut up!"' when she begins laughing. To this point I have been living the experience with her, the conversation with people services, recalling what that involves and waiting for a punch line, or a point to the story. With these two lines I burst into full laughter. We laugh together as she continues enacting the scene. I say 'brilliant' because I am enjoying the performance, as she continues with the 'I said, he said' dialogue between herself and her friend, her use of intonation and strong/over-played Yorkshire dialect 'you work fer't dole office', the use of 'shut up!' said differently three times. I laugh heartily. I laugh in response to her dialogue and we laugh together, a way of indicating consensus and 'mutual understanding' between us (Kangasharju and

Nikko, 2009, p.100). This is made to seem funny because I understand the professional rules she is breaking through gossiping with a friend – that she has shared confidential work with uninvolved others. I am further engrossed in her narrative as we collapse into laughter together with her final line 'you've got security guards in your office', as she makes light of her own work in comparison to his. The humour becomes dark.

I do not fully understand now what made this story so funny to me at the time when what she says should not be funny. The laughter between us goes beyond words. Removing the humour from her narrative leaves the serious task of ending, or in Catherine's words 'terminating' someone's employment, and the breaking of a professional code of conduct. Her words suggest this is not the first/only time she has gossiped about her work with her friend when she mimics his line 'is that that receptionist?' She states he sometimes comes to her home office at lunchtimes to 'get away' (he works at the job centre so works with employees who have lost their jobs) so there is the possibility that they both share confidences with each other about their work. She recounts him remarking that 'oh, that's great' that an employee is 'going to go'. It is her friend, therefore, who brings to her attention the human impact of her work – awakening Catherine from the robotic phone call at which point her emotions kick in. Catherine jokes that he has 'pieced too many things together' and her dialogue suggests guilt that professional confidentiality has been breached. For example, several times she tells me that 'he'd managed to … (figure it out), and I don't tell', slipping her professional mask back on through the laughter. I become part of the gossip and guilt where the three of us are complicit as I am witness to it.

The joke is shared in private, in her home office, where they laugh at the expense of the 'terminated' employee. However, her use of humour to retell this in the interview helps her say what otherwise be difficult to say 'straight' (Gabriel, 1991); that she can end people's employment. In retelling this incident to me in the interview, narrated as a comedy scene in her drama, where the receptionist who is 'terminated' does not have a voice (as this could bring the humour to a halt), she mimics the humour she recounts between her friend and herself, bringing me in to join the joke as an active audience member. One possibility is that by narrating her experience to me in this way reduces any emotional pain experienced both from the seriousness of the task and from the breach of confidentiality. It is an example of 'benign detachment' which

‘defends against, any private feelings of pain’ (Fineman, 1993, p.19). It is also possible that the humour is used as relief, as a way of reducing stress/tension, underpinned by motives of diversion (Giles et al., 1976) (both in her home office and when narrating the experience in the interview). Through our shared laughter in the interview we both distance ourselves from the sinister nature of the task she describes, a diversion tactic in relief (Tracy, Myers and Scott, 2006) from their (and my) experiences of emotionally painful HR work.

In summary, through the narrative ‘protecting ourselves’ participants showed different versions of themselves. Required to be robot-like and conceal their emotions in order to cope with difficult work, they scripted their and managers’ work in line with HR policies. Any compassion they had was rationalized. Yet despite this hard exterior, dealing with others’ emotions drew attention to their own emotions which were expressed in private places, alone or with HR peers. They sometimes found their work upsetting and cried or made light of it by ‘letting off steam’, joking and laughing with HR peers or trusted friends. The laughter expressed in the interviews when talking about the various forms of self-protection seemed mimetic of the situations they recounted, where they gossiped in cupboards and laughed and joked with friends in private about difficult tasks, drawing me into enacting the various forms of self-protection they reported. Through narrating how they protected themselves, the robots faded away to reveal the emotional human beings sitting in front of me.

Doing repair work

The final narrative ‘doing repair work’ accentuates the tensions between participants ‘true’ feelings and not wanting to reveal those same feelings to a researcher in their interview. In viewing all their photographs together at the end of the interview brought to light the contrast between their professional and personal faces and the face they had chosen to represent themselves through their photographs; the emotions they believed they should display in the workplace, and those they had revealed in the interview. This led to participants raising concerns about the negative presentation of themselves they had given earlier in the interview, reframing their negative experiences as positive and/or generating new insights so far uncovered. If participants had shared their experiences so far with me in an interview which mimicked experience (gossiping in a cupboard/in private with a fellow HR

practitioner), now they wanted to put their professional faces back on as they remembered the wider world of human resource management that they belonged to and presented themselves as such to an academic researcher. In this section I first explain the collage activity and summarise the output, then I illustrate three participant responses where they emphasised and reinforced the positives, reframed the negatives, and generated new insights; what I refer to as the narrative 'doing repair work'. This narrative is important to the research questions; how do HR practitioners talk about emotional experiences and how do they evaluate those experiences?

To understand how participants evaluated their emotional experiences at the end of each interview I asked them to do two things: to group photographs together that reflected positive and/or negative experiences, and view the full set of photographs making any observations on the collective group. This activity was based around Collier and Collier's (1986, p.181) open viewing, where still photographs are laid out in front of the viewer(s) collectively for informal analysis:

> 'Open viewing is an unstructured immersion in the visual record, a repeated viewing of all the material that allows you to respond to the images as they *are,* and not simply as you expect them to be […] unstructured slow viewing will often reveal unforeseen elements that may otherwise be missed at normal speed'.

Table 5.1 summarises participants' observations, setting out key quotes, a headline focus and their photograph evaluation i.e. the number of photographs they evaluated as positive (+ve), negative (-ve) or ambivalent (=).

Table 5.1 – Collage responses

Participant	**Quote**	**Headline**	**+ve/=/-ve***
Elaine	There's a lot about people. Yeah and I think that probably is the organisation side, of things […]. I think it were more about (organisation name) than HR.	A people-oriented organisation	5 +ve 1 = 2 -ve
Anna	It looks like a lot of paper … erm and it doesn't look like very humane (laughing) […]. I think that set of pictures, I think just	HR as an emotionless, bland, administrative	3 +ve 4 =

	there doesn't look like a lot of emotion. It doesn't look like … a lot of colour.	function	3 -ve
Alan	It probably says I'm quite boring (laughs) I dunno […] (pause). It probably says that I have coping mechanisms in place.	Coping mechanisms	4 +ve 1 = 2 -ve
Jack	I'm seeing everything as opportunities […] whereas 20 years down the line I might just be a bit like, euuughh I'm sick of this now.	Framing the negative as 'good for my development'	5 +ve 5 =
Sarah	I think it looks exhausting actually (laughs). That sounds ridiculous it makes me feel very tired. Erm, yeah, I think it because it's such a rollercoaster […] yeah, it's a really mixed, mixed job.	Rollercoaster of emotions - ambivalence	4 +ve 4 -ve
Ruth	I mean all of it is part of my job and I love my job. It makes me feel erm, needed (laughs) erm it makes me feel like, […] part of the team.	Loves her job, belonging to the team	4 +ve 6 'challenges'
Natalie	I suppose I'm probably more siding towards HR is a negative environment, to … me.	HR work perceived negatively	8 +ve 6 -ve
Janet	We need to get back to basics in HR, you know, put the people back into erm human resources management and by just taking those photographs it's made me think about it.	Re-humanise HR work	Unclear as uses the photographs to re-imagine a more positive future
Catherine	I'm a little bit unstable clearly (laughs) with the levels of emotion that I feel! […] I'm conscious that mine probably comes across as quite bleak […]. I mean and this is the thing, so even though that bit is quite bleak and quite dark, I do love my job.	Self-conscious about appearing negative and emotional	8 +ve 1 = 3 -ve

Lorraine	I think there's ups and downs isn't there? I was trying to do a positive balance of tough times and lots of positives, and I think there is a real balance in there.	Trying to be positive – turning negatives into positives. Ambivalence	6 +ve 5 = 3 -ve
Sophie	Overall I, I think it makes you feel good to work in HR because I think for the most part, despite the challenges (laughing) you are trying to do the right thing by people […] so erm I think, I think yes I think it is positive.	Doing the 'right' thing is positive work	Did not do this full activity as interview ran over participants' available time

Emphasising and forcing a positive presentation of themselves

On viewing the set, participants gave the impression that they desired to be perceived as doing work they evaluated more positively than negatively. Seven participants evaluated more photographs as positive or mixed than negative, yet their narrative in the earlier part of the interview indicated more negatively balanced experiences. For example, Catherine was self-conscious of 'doom and gloom' photographs representing difficult relationships with employees and 'deliberately started looking for' more positive representations of her work:

> If I'm honest when I, when I started sending you some (photographs) over, I for a period of time thought, everything I'm sending here is a bit doom and gloom, so then I deliberately started looking for more positive ones, because I do as I said, think positively about my job, then I'm thinking 'why is this not manifesting itself?' And I think it's a timing thing […] over the last month I would say I have had a real struggle with that site. So that's probably influenced where I'm at.

She becomes self-conscious of how she compares with other study participants first stating:

> I'd be really interested to see what sort of things came out from people who work in doing the same job.

Then a second time explains why:

> So I'd be really interested to see what other peoples' thoughts are because I'm conscious that mine probably comes across as quite bleak and I hope you can see that I am quite a, quite a positive person, I'm a fairly happy person […] it takes a lot to get me down.

She acknowledges the negativity of her earlier narrative:

> Because we probably talked quite a bit about that negative part of it […]. I mean and this is the thing, so even though that bit is quite bleak and quite dark, I do love my job, and I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't get up every day and do it and do it well, if I didn't enjoy what I did.

Finally for reinforcement she states:

> I mean, are these (photographs) reflective of anybody else that you've … ?

At this point in the interview, Catherine positions me as researcher and I am consciously in that role. I am trying hard not to share similarities with other participants, as I do not want to influence her account, and reply to her in what I think is a bland way that 'everybody's are different obviously but there are certainly some similarities that have come out' where I go on to reveal the example of participants talking about having to look after themselves. I cannot withhold this from her given the relationship we have formed where I have been drawn into enacting with her the everyday world of the office in the interview. Her narrative is entirely mimetic from the point of us beginning the collage activity through to the end of the interview as she re-narrates her experience shown through the photographs. The performance disappears and I become aware of the time as I realise we have been talking for an hour and a half. I am no longer an active participant immersed in her drama but a researcher who now has to move the interview to a close. She positions me as her audience in stating 'I told you (laughing) I could talk a glass eye to sleep, I did warn you!'

Overall Catherine evaluates eight photographs positively, one as ambivalent and three as negative. She states she 'thinks positively about her job' rather than *feels* positive. This suggests the emotional labour involved in a perceived requirement to display positive emotions (disguising her 'true' feelings) when in her role as HR business partner (Hochschild, 1983), rather than the feelings she reports experiencing as interviewee. In organisations positivity is valued over negative expression (Fredrickson, 2003). As she sees her professional identity presented in front of her she wants me to report on a positive picture of the HR business partner, as she is organisationally expected to express positive emotions. Happy employees lead to happy workplaces and positive organisational outcomes (Fisher, 2010); symmetrical positive assumptions (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2012). Yet the

experience of emotion is not so straightforward. A positive outward display may be in response to social or cultural rules to appear happy, masking differing internal feelings (Ahmed, 2010; Fineman, 2003). Given that participants believed others perceived HR work (and in some cases themselves) negatively, it is possible they wished to present a more positive external image of HR work and themselves than they internally felt, in order to dispel the negative perceptions they believed others held of them. I am positioned as a researcher, not a fellow HR practitioner, and in doing so participants enact the everyday process of moving from the private space (where they are free to express their emotions) to the public space where they have to wear their professional face.

Forcing themselves to present more positive feelings about HR work than their true feelings were not unusual participant responses. For example:

> I was probably able to find a lot more negatives than a lot more positives. So I did try and come up with some positives. I hope that some of them do come across as positive but on the whole, you know, my first picture there I can see it, (laughs) that is my, that is my summary of HR (photograph of the words, negative, negative, negative) (Natalie).

That Natalie wished to present a more positive external image of HR work than her 'real' feelings was further shown through an image she had downloaded from the internet of the yellow brick road showing a rainbow at the end of it:

> Natalie: That's the yellow brick road, erm, so this is a positive picture cos this is, erm probably more going back to like the, the staff development, and personal development and what not, this is kind of that. Well actually I have two thoughts on it, so it was kind of that so almost like your journey to erm improving if you like, but also, it was erm, new starters, so almost they're kind of like on their journey and this is, this is us here (points to the Emerald City) this is (name of organisation) and this is them walking up the path, and I'm thinking 'Turn around! Turn around!'(Laughs hard)
>
> Liz: (Laughs hard)
>
> Natalie: (Still laughing, looks at recording device) delete that bit! So yeah no, this is kind of like their path into erm, to (organisation name) of getting, you know, things like their offer letter, pre-employment checks erm and doing their erm induction and what not.

Her words explain what the image represents from an 'official' HR perspective, where new starters complete induction and complete personal development activities. She places the new employee into the photograph as they walk down the

yellow brick road towards her organisation (represented by the Emerald City). She looks down on the scene and then places herself in it as one of the characters as she articulates the reality of what she is thinking, warning the employee to 'turn around, turn around!' As she did so I recalled that she raised her hands to either side of her mouth mimicking a shouting gesture. But the image does not mimic 'reality' as in mimesis; it is a false reality, like in the Wizard of Oz story where the wizard is not a wizard. On realising that she has said her private thoughts out loud to me, she steps out of her diegetic narrative performance and tells me (whilst looking at the recording device) to 'delete that bit'; to not report back the disillusionment she has expressed. I am positioned as researcher again. I laugh at the irony of the image and she continues with her professional script of what she is *supposed* to say.

O'Brien and Linehan (2014, p.1268) found HR practitioners expected to adopt the role of 'cheerleaders', responsible for the 'emotional climate' where they should express positivity and are seen to be 'happy smiley people'. Towards the end of her interview, Catherine became aware she had surfaced some of her negative internal feelings rather than the positive external display expected in her day-to-day role. Her constant need for reassurance and validation with other participants suggests exposing these negative feelings makes her feel uncomfortable. She realises she has revealed more of her hidden self than she possibly intended. Conscious of being perceived as both negative and emotional when first viewing the collage she uses self-deprecating humour, highlighting emotion as a perceived personal deficit (Ziv, 1984):

> I'm a little bit unstable clearly (laughs) with the levels of emotion that I feel!

Acknowledging her emotions is perceived as undesirable to the extent she jokes it makes her seem mentally ill.

Elaine was pleased to have presented herself positively and also wanted to compare herself with other participants. However, unlike Catherine this was not to validate her negativity but to understand if she is most positive:

> I've picked on more of the positives than on the negatives of HR haven't I? That'd be interesting to see whether others are as positive.

However, when reflecting on the set (shown in photograph 5.5 overleaf) Elaine realised the positivity was not necessarily about HR work:

> I think it were more about (organisation name) than HR. Yeah, I think cos, I think cos we work together, HR's not seen as HR, like the big bad people, which is good I suppose. But it'd be totally different in another organisation I think.

Positivity derives from her organisation not the HR function. Her negative perception of HR as 'big bad people' is one she reserves for other organisations, as in her own she believes 'HR is not seen as HR' (the department is titled 'workforce' not HR). Her photograph evaluation breaks her negative stereotype of HR work, and she expresses pride in doing so.

Photograph 5.5 – Elaine's collage

Natalie also came to the realisation that the positivity represented through her photographs was not necessarily about HR work, where her evaluation of more positive than negative photographs did not match her feelings:

> There's eight positive and six negative … though I suppose I'm probably more siding towards HR is a negative environment to … me, erm …

After a 17 second pause when I ask her to reflect on the set (shown overleaf in photograph 5.6) she considers the links between the negative photographs and then states:

> I think for the positive ones, erm I mean, 50% of those are … about *me* and what *I'm* doing kind of to better *myself …*

These were photographs of objects representing her self-development that she explained was necessary to 'better' herself from a job she described as 'draining'.

Photograph 5.6 – Natalie's collage

Participants' accounts suggest they wanted to be seen positively by me, as I was moved from the position of fellow HR practitioner to academic researcher. It is also possible they wanted to be seen positively by themselves. In order to achieve a positive self-image, they had to find the positive in their past experiences, to seek it out where it was not obvious to them. However, even when Natalie found the positive, she realised it was not in relation to HR work itself, but to other experiences in her working life.

It is also important to consider the impact of the interview situation on their expression of emotions. Goffman's (1967, p.6) work on the presentation of socially desirable 'faces' helps further explain:

> 'A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his "feelings" become attached to it. If the encounter sustains an image of him that he has long taken for granted, he probably will have few feelings about the matter. If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to "feel good"; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will "feel bad" or "feel hurt"'.

There are three possible 'faces' arising from the interview encounter. The first is their professional HR face, the face they feel they should show in the interview in relation to their work. The second is their personal face, where when reporting on their past experiences of emotions in HR work they may wish to present their 'true' feelings, i.e. those they have masked at work. These two faces may contradict or mirror each

other, depending on what they feel they can/want to reveal. I suggest the third 'face' which arises at this point in the interview is that of HR work which they have visually represented through the collage of photographs. There is a possible tension here between the professional 'HR' face they intended to display, and that which they have represented through the photographs i.e. if the photographs appear more negative than they intended. These two faces might further conflict with their personal face, where both professional face and the visual/photographic face differ from their 'true' feelings. Displaying the wrong face may lead participants to feel ashamed, bad, or inferior (Goffman, 1967). For example, they may feel bad that they have betrayed the HR profession (and themselves) through a negative portrayal.

In terms of how they positioned me as their audience, this was the point in the interviews where I was positioned as a researcher rather than a fellow HR practitioner. I stepped in as they had finished narrating their experiences elicited by each individual photograph (lifting myself out of their performance) and asked them to consider their photograph set collectively. In doing so, there is the possibility they realised that rather than talking to another HR practitioner they were now talking to a researcher, and so re-narrated their story for their new audience.

Reframing the negative?

Another way of doing repair work was shown by reframing their previously recounted negative experiences. Ruth, whose overall account was the most positive of all and who 'loved' her job, was the only participant to evaluate more photographs negatively. However, she did not want to use the word 'bad' as the opposite of 'good' suggesting a new label:

> Erm, when you say bad … it's not bad, it's sort of erm, what's the word, more of a, a challenge.

Labelling emotions that are 'positive' as good and 'negative' as bad can be an incorrect assumption (Elfenbein, 2007) as what might be experienced positively by one person may be experienced negatively by others. In Ruth's case, she frames negative/bad experiences as positive.

Lorraine reframed negative experiences as now having ambivalent feelings towards. Her D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F. photograph is one example, which she earlier in her interview

described as an ‘absolutely horrendous’ experience having to close down businesses making people redundant, but now:

> I think that’s actually hard cos your negatives are your positives as well aren’t they? So they were, you know, they reflect negative things for me but […] that whole time, that was a really hard time, but I learned a lot, and you know would I change it? No probably not […]. No I don’t know if I think it’s a positive or a negative, I dunno, it sits in both camps for me.

She is more hesitant in her evaluation than her earlier explanations of the experience, introducing an ‘upside’; learning experiences. Jack also did this when reframing all his previously negatively recounted experiences as ‘good for my development’. For example, in relation to a drawing representing the conflict of strike action which he first reports as experiencing some guilt from covering for striking workers, he now states:

> This is a funny one. I suppose for the people striking and for the company it’s a bad situation to be in, but for me I’m, as a sort of selfish point of view I’m, if they announced the strike, cos I don’t mind doing their job on the strike days, I don’t mind it really, I’d say it’s probably quite good because it’s giving me exposure just to this dispute environment.

This is also illustrated when he reports staff coming to him with ‘really random questions just because I’m HR’ which earlier in his interview he describes ‘can be stressful’. He re-narrates his experience at the end of the interview stating:

> Yeah, so getting queries, erm so yeah this yeah, thinking about it, it is quite good for me because when I’m answering these it gives me more confidence and helps me understand stuff more […] so I suppose the more that happens, the more I understand and the better it works for me.

Though his experiences can be negative when he is ‘in the moment’, when reflecting back on them he states:

> At the time it might be a bit of a … a stress, stressful or daunting situation to be in, erm but it’s all good exposure.

Through reframing, participants did repair work; rationalising negative emotional experiences as learning opportunities. A ‘bad’ experience was a ‘challenge’ to overcome; an opportunity to demonstrate their skills/expertise. If they are held responsible for the organisation’s emotional climate (O’Brien and Linehan, 2014) they are expected to role model positivity and replayed this at the end of their interviews. This is a further example of the tension between their professional and personal faces.

In considering the research relationship, given participants know I am an HR lecturer as well as academic researcher, it is possible that they think I want to hear about learning opportunities. For HR practitioners, role modelling self-development is important as they are expected to encourage others to develop, as one of the professional body behaviours is to have a 'passion for learning' (CIPD, 2019).

Revealing new insights - missing emotions?

The collage activity also generated new insights which ranged from imagining a more 'human' HR function, allowing participants to reveal more of their private feelings and realising their work was unemotional. For example, Janet states with sudden realisation:

> We need to get back to basics in HR, you know, put the people back into erm human resources management and by just taking those photographs it's made me think about it.

Rather than evaluating the photographs based on her past experiences, she takes each one and imagines how it could represent her preferred future of HR work:

> Erm this one, (picks up a photograph of the HR office) it's about, but there has to be space and time for people to do their jobs and their roles in the most effective way (long pause) and maybe that one, (points to a photograph of her computer screen) because I just think we need to get away from the computers, more proper communication with people, more listening to people as well.

Photographs she previously described in negative terms, for example the HR office photograph was her 'mini prison' and the computer screen made her feel 'restricted', are now used to construct an idealised view of HR; a more 'human' function.

Sophie, whose narrative exemplified concealing emotions, begins to open up on viewing the set, realising that her emotions are missing from the picture:

> I suppose there might have been maybe one more (photograph) on the emotional side, or some of the, that touched on about soaking up some of the emotions, so maybe I didn't have one that fully reflected that.

The activity enables her to reveal her personal face (over the professional and unemotional face presented earlier in her interview):

> I mean I've been in situations where I've been genuinely upset and I've thought, you know, I hate this job, I hate this job, cos it's just horrible having to do that.

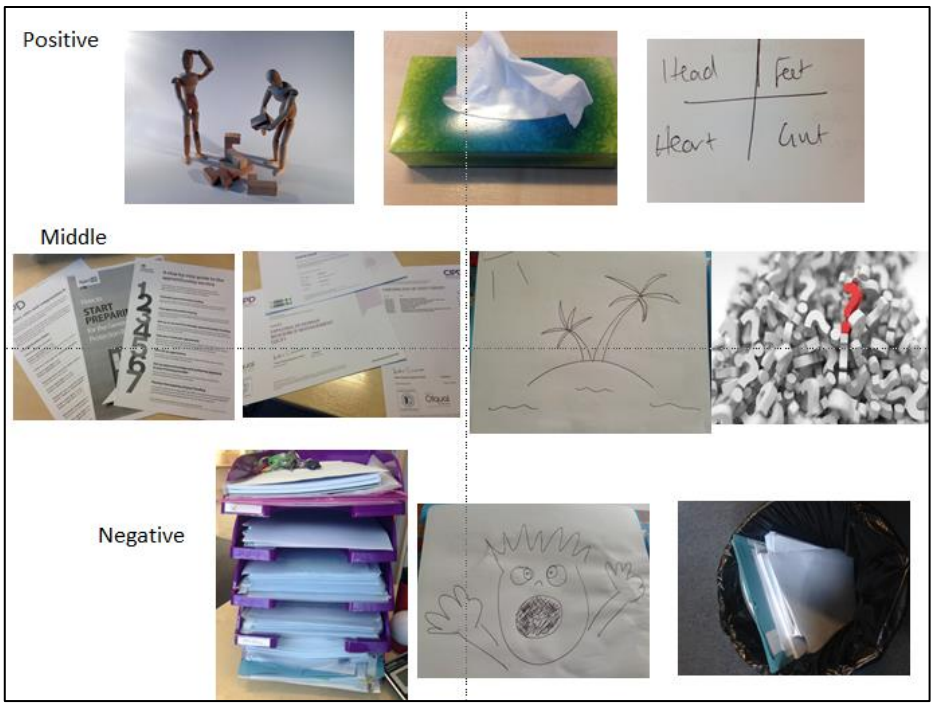
Yet this glimmer of her private feelings are overshadowed as she sums up her reflections returning to her professional face, maintaining the position I have held throughout her interview as the academic researcher listening to her:

> Overall I, I think it makes you feel good to work in HR, because I think for the most part despite the challenges (laughing) you are trying to do the right thing by people, erm and that's the balance between erm making sure that people are treated fairly, erm we are the conscience of the organisation, that is why we are here, erm and for holding people to account when they're not, somebody has to do that, so erm I think, I think yes, I think it is positive.

HR work is constructed as positive, an 'official' view using managerialist language. Yet she 'makes' herself 'feel good to work in HR'. HR has an important organisational role to play and she *should* feel positive, although she at times 'hates' her job, another illustration of emotional labour.

Anna's collage (photograph 5.7) also leads to a realisation that emotion is missing from her set:

Photograph 5.7 – Anna's collage



> Liz: So looking at them as a collective, together, for you is there anything striking?
>
> Anna: (Long pause) It looks like a lot of paper (laughs).
>
> Liz: Actually yes (laughing).

> Anna: It looks like a lot of paper … erm and it doesn't look like very humane (laughing).
>
> Liz: It doesn't look very humane?
>
> Anna: No, it looks more … I think that set of pictures, I think just there doesn't look like a lot of emotion. It doesn't look like … a lot of colour […].
>
> Liz: And does that, (laughing) is that how you feel? (laughs)
>
> Anna: How you feel? (laughs) Erm …
>
> Liz: In your work?
>
> Anna: In my work? Maybe it's subconsciously a representation of how I feel about my work (laughing).

Earlier in her interview she described herself perceived as an unemotional human being where she stated:

> Quite often it feels like other people don't think you're a person, and you don't have *any* emotions … at all.

The collage activity reveals to Anna that the photographs represent her 'subconscious' perceptions of how HR work is expected to be enacted, as a bland, emotionless and administrative function, representing HR to me in the way she thinks others see HR. Though we have been two HR practitioners talking through most of her interview I laugh at myself as I hear my voice ask the question 'is that how you feel?', aware that I keep asking her about her feelings and am now a researcher observing myself in action. She repeats my questions and now plays me (Liz the researcher) as she states what I am thinking 'maybe it's subconsciously a representation of how I feel about my work' and laughs. We have stepped out of her drama and into mine. Yet despite the laughter and the mimicry, her perception of how others treat her as an emotionless being materialises in front of her in the interview.

For these three participants the collage activity made emotions visible through their invisibility. They all noted how emotions were absent, either from the missing 'human', from themselves, or from their work.

Why is this important to understand how HR practitioners experience emotions?

This interpretation draws attention to the shifting meanings of photographs when viewed at different points in time (Becker, 1998), the value of viewing photographs collectively to generate new insights (Shortt and Warren, 2019) and the influence of

context on emotional expression (Wiley, 1990). The context of the research interview is important to consider when suggesting possible meaning.

In line with my subjectivist positioning, participants decided what to take photographs of. In doing so they decided what to include/exclude to make a 'good' photograph for 'later consumption' in the interview where it is collectively viewed (Warren, 2018). As narrators of their own lives, when explaining photograph meaning during the interview they decided what to include or exclude from their narrative to achieve a particular end (Riessman, 2008). When we first viewed their photographs one by one participants explained their meaning though their professional or personal face, whichever they chose to present, and it is impossible to know which version of themselves they presented. When they stood back to view the full set of photographs some participants realised the narrative they had constructed during the interview was more negative than that which they had intended to present. If they saw the 'wrong face' presented through the photographs they might have felt bad or ashamed because they:

> 'Relied upon the encounter to support an image of self to which he has become emotionally attached and which he now finds threatened' (Goffman, 1967, p.8).

This resulted in participants emphasising and reinforcing the positives and/or reframing their experiences, a way of demonstrating loyalty to a profession that they had discredited. They re-narrated their experiences and did repair work to themselves. Some participants also generated new understandings about the lack of emotion in their jobs, where the photographs exposed their taken-for-granted experiences (Rose, 2016).

In addition, the collage activity was a closing activity, an add-on to the focal discussion about photograph meaning, signalling an imminent return to their day jobs. It is possible that through the visual collective representation of their working lives (made formal as I took a photograph of their collage) the formality of HR work materialised in front of them. In taking time to view their experiences represented through the collective photograph set as an 'unstructured slow viewing' (Collier and Collier, 1986), they saw before them a representation of the negative perceptions they believed others held about their work. They were struck by the 'punctum' in the photographs which had a deep personal meaning (Barthes, 2000). They

remembered what and who they should be, as they were soon to transition from being interview participant to HR practitioner, and from being one of a pair of HR practitioners who had been laughing about the job. Their closing words reflected the positive emotions they felt they *should* display/express, rather than those earlier revealed as research participants to a sympathetic listener, a researcher with prior experience of their work.

Overall, this activity illustrates the complexity of understanding emotional experience and the shifting nature of narratives. Participants changed their previously expressed emotional positions, felt uneasy when looking back on themselves, articulated contradictions, and reframed their emotions in ways they perceived others (the researcher, organisations and other participants [their HR peers]) would consider more 'acceptable'. The narratives they constructed about their lives were transient, as they re-narrated their experiences in order to repair their previous negative presentation of themselves.

In conclusion, the narratives 'protecting ourselves' and 'doing repair work' suggest a requirement of HR work was that emotions should be hidden. In acknowledging that those not in HR roles expressed emotions towards them (due to the difficult tasks participants were required to do which resulted in strong emotions from both themselves and staff) participants 'managed' their own emotions in order to navigate emotionally demanding work. They reported doing this in the workplace (becoming robots, 'letting off steam' with peers in private places, and caring for themselves) and they also 'managed' their emotions in the interview when narrating and re-narrating their experiences. On realising they had revealed their 'true' feelings in the interview, where they enacted the emotional drama of their work they internally felt but did not necessarily show to others, they repaired the negative impression they feared this re-presentation of their experience had given, through their professional faces in conversation with the researcher.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

The principal research question of this study is ‘How do HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives?’ Using a narrative methodology I undertook a mimetic and diegetic interpretation of data from photo-interviews with HR practitioners to develop an understanding of their subjective experiences of emotions. In this chapter I discuss what the emotional experiences of my participants mean in the context of what is already known about the working lives of HR practitioners and develop a new theory about the emotionally saturated nature of HR work, which is the first contribution of this study.

I begin by summarising my findings from the five narratives. From this I developed the theory that HR work is emotionally saturated because of the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced from doing some of the work/tasks required which are supposed to be unemotional but are deeply experienced by HR practitioners. I next set out the key features of my proposed theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work. These features comprise: the distinction between ‘work itself’ and how the work is experienced, the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced, and the conceptualisation of HR work as ‘emotionally dirty’. This theory is highly contextual and relational as the emotional experience of the work is dependent on the nature of the required task and the impact it has on others and oneself. I next demonstrate how using participant-led photo-elicitation supported participants to externalise their experiences of emotions. In the final section I set out the second contribution of this study, which is methodological, involving development/refinement of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis that ‘revealed’ how narrative tensions are experienced by both the participants and researcher in the interview. Through this interpretation I offer a lens through which to view interviews as sites of emotion-rich narratives. I demonstrate the value of paying attention to observing, acknowledging and interpreting the emotions expressed in interviews, both those of the participant and researcher.

Summary of findings

Through my interpretation I identified five narratives: no-one likes us, I’d hate your job, we’re different, protecting ourselves and doing repair work. I argue that these

narratives indicate that participants were in a position where they felt disliked and mistrusted. Because of this they isolated themselves from non-HR staff resulting in feelings of loneliness and sadness. Their work also required them to do some tasks that participants experienced as emotionally difficult, draining or damaging; tasks that others told them they would not want to do themselves. Study participants also positioned themselves as different to non-HR staff because of their people management expertise, the policies they were responsible for, and their organisational positioning where they were neither employee nor manager but expected to be balanced and in the middle of both. The emotions experienced as a result of this difference were broad-ranging, a mix of conflicting emotions, both positive and negative. These conflicting emotions and the struggles encountered in perceiving themselves as 'different' to non-HR staff resulted in them concealing their own emotions from others. They could not be themselves as they struggled with the tensions in their work. In navigating emotionally demanding work they tried to protect themselves from painful emotions. They made conscious efforts to look after themselves and their HR peers as no-one else considered their wellbeing. They felt required to show their 'professional face' which meant emotions should be hidden from employees and managers and only expressed in private with HR peers or those they trusted. That they should hide their emotions, or at least only express those that presented them in what they perceived to be a positive light, became apparent at the end of the interviews when they did repair work. Participants reframed the emotional drama of their working lives (that they had presented to someone they positioned as a fellow HR practitioner) by re-narrating their experiences as positive when in conversation with someone they positioned as an academic researcher.

Overall, participants' accounts highlighted narrative tensions and the personal struggles experienced from the requirement to enact HR work. They are responsible for handling others' strong emotions and are affected by those emotions, but are situated in a professionalised managerialist culture which requires them to give the appearance of acting in unemotional ways. The first contribution of this study is a theory that interprets these findings, as I next describe.

The emotionally saturated nature of HR work

HR work is assumed to be unemotional and hence there is a taken-for-granted assumption that the experience of doing the work is also unemotional. Participants in this study experienced what is *supposed* to be professional and thus unemotional work as emotionally saturated. These findings lead me to propose the theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work which I briefly summarise here.

HR work is emotionally saturated because of the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced from doing some of the work/tasks required which are supposed to be unemotional but are deeply experienced by HR practitioners. A key feature of this theory, therefore, is the distinction between 'work itself' (a range of job-related tasks that can be listed described and taught) and how that work is experienced (an ongoing and multifaceted stream of emotional experiences). These tensions and struggles experienced are a second key feature of this theory. Because HR 'work itself' is supposed to be unemotional, yet participants' experiences were emotionally saturated, emotions are constructed as unwanted and 'emotionally dirty'. The conceptualisation of HR work as 'emotionally dirty' is a third key feature of this theory. Finally, this theory is highly contextual and relational as the emotional experience of the work is dependent on the nature of the required task and the impact it has on others and oneself. That is, carrying out different aspects of HR work generates emotional experiences that can be positive, negative or neutral depending on how others (recipients) respond and the emotions it evokes in oneself. Overall, this theory uncovers the emotionally saturated nature of HR work through the experiences of the emotional human beings responsible for the work who are responsible for handling other emotional human beings' strong emotions and who themselves may become emotionally damaged by those emotions.

In this section I will, first, set out the distinction between the nature of HR work and the experience of doing it. In doing so, I explain what the emotionally saturated experience of doing HR work feels like and how participants experienced strong emotions that may be emotionally damaging. Second, I will discuss how the tensions between the emotions they feel they should show and those they experience are irreconcilable so they experience their work as an emotional struggle. One of the ways participants positioned this struggle was as an ongoing battle in which they

held tense and conflicting positions. Third, I suggest that participants construct the emotions arising from their work as unwanted and 'emotionally dirty'. Fourth, I will discuss how, as they experience strong emotions which are potentially emotionally damaging to themselves, they protect themselves by giving the appearance of acting unemotionally. Finally, I will discuss how distinguishing between work and the experience of it uncovers the emotional human beings who are responsible for the work, as work and experience interact and influence each other.

The nature of HR work

As I presented in chapter two, HR work is supposed to be unemotional. It is largely driven by and embedded in policies, procedures and practices aligned to organisational goals designed to ensure staff are treated fairly and consistently to promote organisational commitment (Armstrong, 2014) and to minimise organisational risk from litigation. This is a procedural view of the relationship between employees and the employer (Gennard et al., 2016) where the HR practitioner is positioned as an objective party in the middle of that relationship. My study participants reported handling procedural tasks such as dismissals, redundancies and underperformance of staff, dealing with short and long-term absence (including of those who are terminally ill), mental health issues and the 'death in service' of employees, removing or reducing financial benefits/reward packages, designing appraisal and performance management processes, dealing with bullying and harassment issues, conflicts between staff and industrial action, and making changes to terms and conditions of employment. In handling these tasks (sometimes alongside or advising line managers in how to do them) the HR practitioner has to ensure that 'correct' procedures are followed: that objective investigations are carried out, notes documented, formal meetings held, outcomes documented in writing, rights of appeal given. The hard 'facts' are established and considered in light of the policy and risk to the organisation. This work is bureaucratic, process-driven and (as evidenced by my participants) can be laborious. Emotions do not feature in the written procedures, and very little advice or consideration given to how to have a conversation with human beings who might be emotionally affected by the task. Even where training is offered to those who are required to enact such work, for example ACAS's training in 'how to handle

challenging conversations', the advice is reduced to a four-step procedure (ACAS, 2020), turning an emotionally laden conversation into a written procedure to follow.

Yet these tasks/this work is inherently emotional with a potentially serious negative emotional impact on those on the receiving end. It is those required to enact them/it who are supposed to be emotionless. Molinsky and Margolis (2005, p.245) describe such work as 'necessary evils', defined as:

> 'Work-related tasks in which an individual must, as part of his or her job, perform an act that causes emotional or physical harm to another human being in the service of achieving some greater good or purpose'.

Despite generating negative emotions these tasks are described as 'necessary' to improving organisational performance. HR work is situated in a professionalised managerialist culture supported by a belief that HRM is a source of competitive advantage; therefore HR policies and practices (the everyday tasks HR practitioners are required to deliver) should be aligned to business strategy (Armstrong, 2014). For example, a cost leadership strategy to tightly control the cost of 'resources' (Porter, 1980) may require an HR practitioner to lead, design and deliver a redundancy programme, resulting in emotional pain for those affected. That is, in moving away from its welfare roots, the professionalization of HRM led HR practitioners to be rational operators of policies and procedures that, some argue, dehumanise staff (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010; Legge, 1999; Steyaert and Janssens, 1999) treating them as resources not human beings. For example, tools and practices such as appraisals, job evaluations, salary ranking and career ladders which discipline and normalize individuals and make rationality and measurement the norm (Townley, 1993). Yet the 'resources' have emotions; emotions which disrupt the rational ideals (McMurray and Ward, 2014). So too do HR practitioners, as this study shows.

'Unemotional' HR work is experienced by HR practitioners as emotionally saturated: they are not impervious to the strong emotions their work sometimes generates in staff but are deeply affected by them. They are also not impervious to the negative image that has become attached to their profession. There is no escaping the human/emotional impact of their work as experienced by the person in the position – which I explain next.

The experience of doing HR work

This study distinguishes between HR work as a range of tasks (what is required) and HR work as a continuous stream of multifaceted experiences (how the work is experienced). These experiences are of engaging in the unsavoury/'necessary evil' tasks and becoming the recipient of other's negative emotions. However, not all emotional experiences are negative, and not all HR tasks are responded to emotionally. That is, carrying out HR work generates emotional experiences that can be positive, negative or neutral, depending on how others (recipients) respond and the emotions it evokes in oneself. Social, cultural and relational influences and professional norms are therefore important to understand this theory.

For example, an employee might be happy/elated that they have been promoted as a result of a promotion procedure, or angry that they are being disciplined; emotions that are influenced by social and cultural expectations. These resulting emotions are directed towards the person doing the task (the HR practitioner), indicating the relational aspect. The HR practitioner may also feel happy for the promoted employee but not experience similar feelings (of happiness) as they have not been the recipient of the good news but have carried out the task required of them. In the latter case they experience the job as it is defined on paper, as an unemotional task, whereas if they absorb the recipients' emotions they may experience similar feelings (happiness) or experience their own differing emotions in response to the emotions directed towards them. Similarly, when doing work which has a negative impact on others, such as a disciplinary meeting, the HR practitioner may be impervious to others' emotions (experiencing the work unemotionally), or experience satisfaction from following the procedure 'well' (as Sarah reported), both being professional expectations/norms. An employee may express remorse or anger as a result of the disciplinary action, emotions that the HR practitioner may absorb. S/he may in addition, or alternatively, experience differing emotions such as guilt at having caused harm or anger towards the employee. The presumably unemotional tasks of HR work are thus experienced as emotionally saturated.

There may be times where HR practitioners experience their own, individualised emotions which are separate and distinct from others. These emotions are hidden from others and deeply experienced. For example, Lorraine reported experiencing

shame when she and a senior manager shared a joke together about staff they were due to make redundant. What was visible to others was the HR work, the task of making people redundant, which was enacted in an unemotional way despite the strong emotions she received from affected staff who were on the receiving end of the task; the relational aspect. Lorraine's experience of the work, however, was one where she became deeply affected by the work; an experience she referred to in her interview as 'damaging'.

Emotions can therefore be experienced along a continuum of differing individualised experiences ranging from unemotional to deeply emotional. This continuum demonstrates that there is not one simple explanation of and/or for how HR work is experienced. The work is experienced in differing ways by different people and influenced by differing individual, social, cultural and relational factors. The distinction between the work itself and how the work is experienced is one of the key features of my theory of emotionally saturated work. However, despite the differing nature of personal emotional experience, there were some commonalities that I uncovered through my empirical work.

My study findings suggest that participants' emotional experiences of their work were evaluated (by them) more negatively than positively. That is, although they could feel unaffected by them, or could feel sympathy towards them without feeling emotionally affected themselves, study participants overall were affected by the strong negative emotions of others that were directed towards them, indicating the social and relational influences. They felt disliked and different, sad and isolated. They (the HR practitioners) felt they were regarded by others as emotionless beings by reason of the emotional hurt they caused to others: that is, they assume that others think that those who cause pain can only do that if they are themselves cold-hearted and emotionless. However, this study shows that the HR practitioner whose work actions cause emotional harm to others may become emotionally hurt by the pain the recipient returns towards them. This contrasts with Frost (2004) who suggests HR practitioners are an example of what he refers to as organisational 'toxin handlers' who try to minimise the inevitable emotional pain which is generated in organisations for others (for example, by 'softening' difficult messages from organisational leaders, by listening, empathising and noticing others' suffering and acting compassionately to minimise others' suffering). He argues that toxin handlers themselves are at risk of

also becoming toxic where they are ‘so immersed in the work of healing others that they are unable or unwilling to recognize the toll being taken on their own mental and physical health’ (p.118). They ‘become isolated and trapped in their role’, unable to help themselves through acts such as sharing the pain they experience with others. This does not equate with what emerged in my study. Though participants did report feelings of isolation, in contrast to Frost’s findings they also reported themselves feeling disliked, distrusted and perceived as different. They did not view themselves in a ‘healing’ role, nor did they experience the emotions that are assumed to be felt in such a role. There were very few accounts of them becoming engrossed in healing others’ pain, though Sarah did report ‘a sense of satisfaction’ gained from doing the ‘nasty stuff’ ‘well’. It could be conjectured that this was a possible way of defending herself from the negative effects of her work, but alternatively that this is a logical response required of HR practitioners by the work itself. They became emotionally harmed *not* from dispassionately doing work/handling painful emotions of others but from the strong emotions that non-HR staff directed towards them and their perceptions of how they felt regarded highly negatively by colleagues. This demonstrates the social and relational influences on emotions.

My findings suggest that HR practitioners are damaged by the toxic emotions which are generated from doing ostensibly unemotional work that is emotionally saturated. ‘Damaging’ is the word Lorraine used to describe an emotionally challenging experience when she had to close a business and make staff redundant. I use her description of this experience to encapsulate the struggle and tensions all participants experienced from demands to project an unemotional/professional image, whilst experiencing both others’ and their own strong emotions. They tried to cope with these emotional tensions by ‘becoming robots’ and concealing the emotions they experienced, but this proved to be an unworkable coping mechanism. They were damaged from having to handle the emotions evoked by doing supposedly unemotional work.

These emotional tensions are a further key feature of this theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work; work that is permeated with irreconcilable tensions, as I next explain.

The impossibility of reconciling irreconcilable emotions

Participants experienced tensions between the emotions they felt they should experience as caring HR practitioners (such as empathy), those they should experience as a professional function (none) and those they reported experiencing that they concealed (such as frustration, anger, loneliness and shame). For example, they reported feeling expected to 'show empathy' towards the situations both employees and managers found themselves in (resulting from both work and personal lives). Yet as HR 'professionals' they felt they should not experience emotions, they were expected to remain impartial and objective (like the work itself), to be 'in the middle' of employees and managers and not 'side' with either. This put them in an impossible position where they were neither employees nor management, and so they had no position. This tension between being expected to experience some emotions and also to not experience them was further complicated by their own (concealed) emotions of, for example, frustration with the position they were in, or having their expertise ignored by managers. They also articulated experiencing feelings of loneliness arising from being neither manager nor employee and from perceiving themselves disliked by non-HR staff. In experiencing these three tensions they faced the impossibility of reconciling irreconcilable emotions: thus the work itself is experienced as an emotional struggle, rather than how it is *supposed* to be experienced; as a set of unemotional job-related tasks.

I use Elaine's narrative to further illustrate my point. Elaine reported how she experienced frustration and anger as a result of one aspect of her work, shown to me through a photograph of steam coming out of a kettle (though these were emotions she concealed and the steam was also not visible to me until she explained what she was trying to take a photograph of [the steam] where the interview mimicked experience). Being required to carry out the unemotional task of holding absence meetings with staff who were sick she illustrated a tension between being supposed to show empathy towards a sick employee, yet not experiencing empathy. She experienced anger due to her perception that the employee was abusing the absence policy as the employee in front of her was 'sat there dolled up to the nines'. She reported that she did not want to show that the situation 'made her blood boil'. However, she showed no emotion and remained 'professional' by following the absence policy/procedure and asking unemotional questions focused on the task

such as ‘when do you think you will be returning?’ As she could not reconcile these conflicting emotions, she made conscious efforts to regulate her emotions after completing the required task, such as taking a walk and slowing her breathing. The task did not finish immediately but was projected forward because she was required to keep contact with the sick employee and ensure they returned to work as soon as they were able. This unemotional task that involved concealing the strong emotions she experienced was not short-term or one-off but continued into the future.

Elaine was not the only participant who struggled to conceal emotions resulting from the experience of doing the ‘work itself’. Sarah felt frustrated when senior managers ‘don’t get it’ (‘it’ being HR work), represented through a photograph of her head face down on her desk. HR work itself evoked strong emotions when the practitioner perceived that the work was misunderstood by managers, emotions she should only express in private in her office or when she ‘hid in a cupboard’ with an HR peer. Anna showed a self-drawing of her screaming face representing her private feelings in response to being asked to do ‘unnecessary admin’ and how non-HR staff expressed strong emotions towards her, such as anger. Her emotions were evoked both from misconceptions about what the work entailed and from others’ dislike of HR staff, indicating relational influences. The way she experienced the work was concealed from others. Natalie’s ‘true’ feelings about HR work leaked out in the interview when she showed me a photograph of the Emerald City from the Wizard of Oz story representing a new employee’s induction and development journey. She revealed that she wanted to tell new employees to ‘turn around, turn around’ and to not continue down the yellow brick road leading to her organisation. In doing so she revealed a conflict between the nature of ‘official’ HR tasks and her personal feelings about them that she should not reveal to others; an illustration of the differentiation between the work (a rational task of inducting and training new staff) and the HR practitioners’ conflicting feelings about it which were concealed. Even Sophie who presented her professional/HR face in the majority of her interview, stating that ‘a lot of the time you just gotta kind of zip it, zip it up’ and that ‘if you’re in HR and you’re not doing that then you shouldn’t be in HR’, struggled to maintain this impression throughout her interview. As the interview ended she revealed she sometimes ‘soaked up’ others’ emotions as doing HR tasks such as making difficult decisions about people’s employment meant she could ‘go home and feel like really rubbish

about being part of that decision' and feel 'genuinely upset'. It was only at home that she allowed herself to express emotions. In the workplace her experiences of the work itself were concealed.

In other words, HR practitioners struggle to conceal emotions that conflict with the professional appearance they are required to adopt. These emotions are not experienced as discrete, short episodes but may be longer lasting, and perhaps an inherent part of the job.

Being in an emotional struggle

Thus far, I have described some of the key features of this theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work. First, how the work itself was supposed to be but was not unemotional and how personal emotional experience differed. Second, the irreconcilable tensions this created which could leave participants damaged from having to handle the emotions evoked by doing supposedly unemotional work. Participants' experiences of their work could leave them emotionally harmed by the strong emotions non-HR staff expressed towards them. In this section I discuss another feature of this theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work, the personal struggles encountered by emotional human beings who were supposed to handle unemotional work. During the interviews participants expressed these struggles not as one-off occurrences but characterised them as ongoing 'battles' where they took shifting positions, both siding with and fighting against managers and fighting against trade unions.

Participants positioned themselves both as aggressors and/or targets for others to attack. The strength of their feeling and the struggles they faced were illustrated as participants referred to their experiences of work using metaphors for conflict. Sarah described her work as 'a bit of a battle sometimes', one where she had to 'fight for headcount' with her firm's partners to get sufficient HR staff to do what she perceived to be 'good work'. Conversely, she perceived herself viewed by others as an aggressor as she used the analogy of staff 'hiding in cupboards' because they believed 'I'm coming for them'. Catherine described herself viewed by others as both a 'hatchet person' and an 'easy target' for the trade unions who described her as 'vile and horrible'. Strong emotions were evoked from perceiving themselves disliked by others. Lorraine used the photograph of a crocodile to illustrate that she had to 'bite'

and be ‘quite hard’ when doing the ‘unemotional’ HR tasks required of her such as ending the employment of a poor performing manager. She led her own ‘little rebellion’ against senior directors with her HR peers when required to do their dirty work of closing down a business. Janet did not trust the managers in her organisation who she believed ‘rifled’ through her confidential files and when she restricted their access believed they retaliated by making her redundant. Participants used differing emotion labels to describe these struggles such as ‘discomfort’, ‘frustrating’, ‘conflicting’, ‘isolating’, ‘upset’ and ‘stressed’; illustrating the continuum of differing emotional experiences. However, the emotional struggles which resulted from doing ‘unemotional’ work were overall deeply experienced and hidden from others. It was through their use of battle metaphors that the strength of their emotional experience leaked out in the interview, as opposed to the professional unemotional appearance they were supposed to give. They struggled because they perceive they have to be different to non-HR staff so feel isolated, take sides when required to (with managers or employees), but should also remain in the middle of both. They felt they were perceived as uncaring, disliked, mistrusted and unapproachable. Their experiences were emotionally saturated as they were harmed by the strong emotions directed towards them in these ‘battles’ which deeply affected them.

These are not the images of HR work that can be found in HR textbooks or professional body publications. These are the perceived realities of ‘unemotional’ HR work as experienced by my study participants. Tensions and ambiguities in the HR role have been and continue to be well documented (Keegan et al., 2018, Keegan, Brandl and Aust, 2019; Lang and Rego, 2015; Legge, 1978, 1995; Sheehan et al., 2013; Watson, 1977, 1986) yet the emotional nature of this tension has not received the same attention. This study shows that HR practitioners experience their work as an ongoing emotional struggle. These struggles are exacerbated by the position they hold resulting in participants positioning themselves as ‘different’ to non-HR staff. This was by reason of their people management expertise, the policies for which they were responsible, and their organisational positioning where they were neither employee nor manager but expected to be balanced and in the middle of both. The emotions generated as a result of this difference were broad-ranging, experienced as a mix of conflicting emotions; both positive and negative. These conflicting

emotions and the struggles encountered in trying to be different resulted in them concealing their own emotions. Showing emotions could further weaken them by undermining their positions as (unemotional) professionals so they absorb the emotions generated by their experiences and their experiences are emotionally saturated.

The professional expectation that they should be unemotional leads me to introduce the final feature of the theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work; that because their work was supposed to be unemotional, participants constructed emotions as unwanted and, as I will go on to next argue, their work as 'emotionally dirty'.

The experience of doing 'emotionally dirty' work

Because HR 'work itself' is supposed to be unemotional, yet participants' experiences were emotionally saturated, emotions are constructed as unwanted and can be conceptualised as 'emotionally dirty'. In this section I begin by explaining what is meant by 'dirty work' and how it can be viewed as emotionally dirty, before exploring how emotionally dirty work is experienced.

Dirty work involves tasks that 'impact negatively upon our sense of occupational identity or personal dignity' (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p.1124). This work may involve the handling of or be associated with physical dirt; it is tainted by the proximity to dirt, as seen in the work of cleaners, refuse collectors and slaughterhouse workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). It may also be associated with social and moral taint (Hughes, 1958). Social taint arises from contact with others who are stigmatized (professions such as prison guards or social workers) or where the profession itself is deemed to serve others (waiting staff, housekeepers). Moral taint arises from occupations of 'dubious virtue' such as sex work and debt collecting (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). These three dimensions tend to be used by scholars interchangeably when referring to 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). Within HR work, dismissing staff has been considered a 'dirty task' done by managers and/or HR practitioners (Gandolfi, 2009; Rayner, Djurkovic and McCormack, 2014) because, firstly, there is a possible (though unlikely) physical taint of potential physical attack from the terminated employee. Secondly, there is a social taint if the dismissal is viewed as 'good' or 'bad' i.e. whether the firing manager perceives the

victim ‘deserved it’. Finally, there is a moral taint associated with depriving someone of income/employment (Rayner, Djurkovic and McCormack, 2014). McMurray and Ward (2014, p.1134) are perhaps the first to reconceptualise HR work as ‘dirty work’ because it includes emotional dirt which they defined as:

> ‘a subjective state assigned by either the individual involved or outside observers through which emotions are deemed to be in some sense polluting. Such pollution is repellent to the extent that it threatens a sense of solidarity, stability or order’.

It follows, in reference to this study, that emotions are polluting in the sense that they threaten the managerialist focus of HR work where the desired state is to work on ‘strategic’ issues, that is, the ‘work itself’. Emotions (sadness/tears) are considered taboo, and are ‘contextually inappropriate’ (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p.1139). This is one possible explanation for why participants did ‘repair work’ during the interviews when reporting what their work entailed. HR work is ‘emotionally dirty’ as it:

> ‘involves dealing with the difficult, disruptive and out-of-place emotions of others as part of a work-based encounter. It is work that others would rather avoid for fear that intense and difficult emotions might touch or taint them’ (Ward and McMurray, 2016, p.61).

Ward and McMurray’s study of the ‘dark side’ of emotional labour included an interview with one HR director who in a similar vein to my participants remained neutral and tried to show empathy when listening to employees’ emotional problems. Beyond this, I have found no other empirical research which has associated HR work with emotional dirt. However, it is clear from Ward and McMurray’s (2016) arguments that understanding HR work as emotionally dirty helps explain some of the negative emotions experienced by the HR practitioners in this study. That is, organisations and the profession of HR are supposed to be rational, emotion-free zones; it follows that emotions are *pollutants* that disrupt the smooth handling of strategic decisions. HR practitioners feel themselves polluted by their close contact with the irrational, with emotions, as is shown in the derogatory metaphors they used to explain their work. For example, Catherine equated HR work with ‘having to walk the dog’ on a bleak winter’s morning – dog walking is not only for the dog’s health but also because it is necessary for the dog’s toileting habits. Sophie reduced handling others’ emotions to ‘baggage’ that she must carry, reducing the job to the status of the lowly bag carrier. Ruth explained that her past experiences of HR work left her

feeling like ‘a little scrap on the side’ where she felt unwanted - or discarded like food that is thrown away or fed to animals. Anna used a photograph of her paperwork ‘dumped in the (rubbish) bin’ to illustrate how she felt ‘disheartened’ and ‘frustrated’ when her advice was over-ruled, reducing her own work to the status of waste/dirt. The unemotional bureaucratic procedures she was supposed to advise others to use could generate strong negative emotions in the HR practitioner when managers perceived they knew better or did not want to follow that advice. Participants also reported that ‘outside observers’ (McMurray and Ward, 2014), friends and managers that they socialised and worked with, regarded their work as that of the untouchables, as encapsulated in the simple phrase ‘I’d hate your job’. Catherine joked that the idea of being hugged as an HR practitioner was absurd and when Natalie was hugged she felt ‘shell-shocked’. They were physically and metaphorically untouchable. Ruth stated that non-HR staff in one organisation she had worked in referred to the HR department as ‘Human Remains’, a label which degrades the occupant of the job to a decomposing body rather than a living human being. Handling others’ strong emotions was constructed as work that is as undesirable as any work that involves handling ‘dirt’. For Catherine, her work could leave her feeling as if she could vomit as a result of the strong emotions expressed towards her that ‘give me gip’[1]. Participants experienced the negative nature of the tasks they had to do as difficult, draining and/or damaging to them, implying that they were polluted by the job, so that they became ‘dirty’.

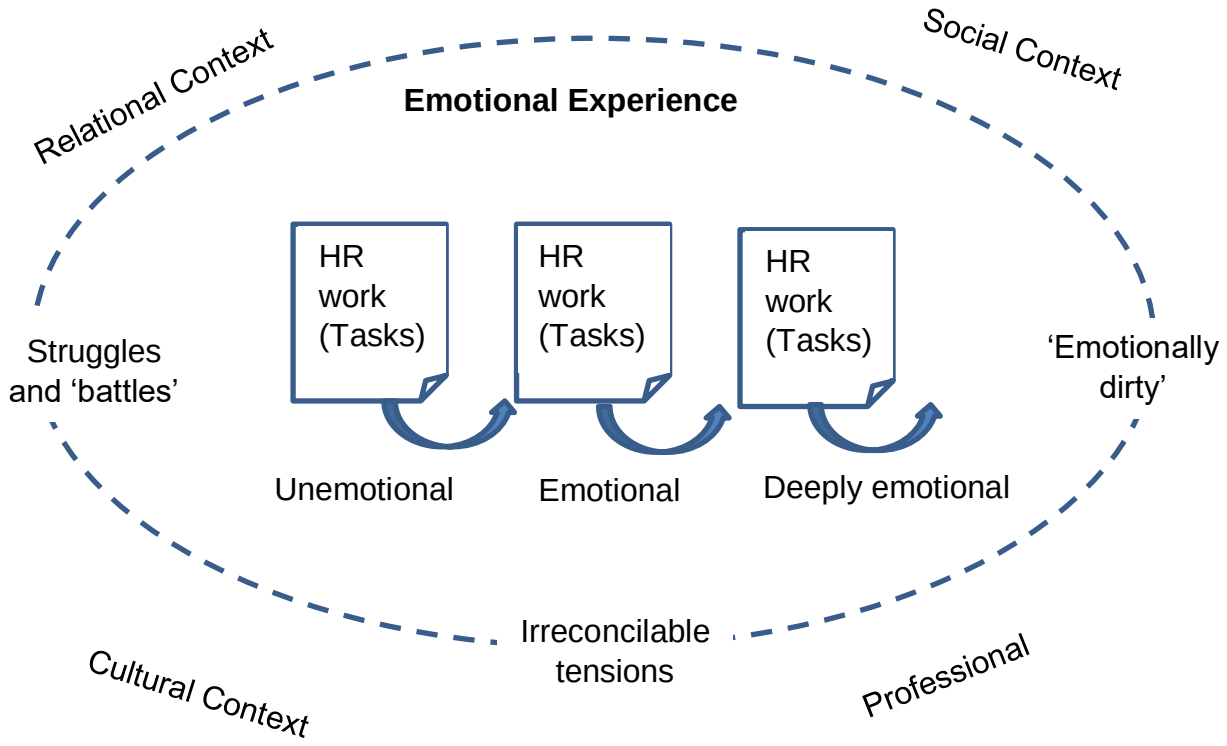
These intense emotions which were concealed from non-HR staff illustrate the social and relational influences on the HR practitioners in this study. Emotions were evoked through their relationships with non-HR staff and through others’ and their own perceptions of HR work and how it should be enacted. These emotions are polluting – they have to keep the ‘dirty little secret’ of their emotions private. Trying to conceal these unwanted emotions added to the irreconcilable tensions and struggles they encountered and their work was emotionally saturated.

Thus far, I have set out the key features of the theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work, which I depict in figure 6.1, and next explain.

[1] Gip is a colloquial word used in the north of England to refer to something that makes one feel like vomiting - https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gip (accessed 2 March 2020).

I have placed personal emotional experience and HR work within the oval shape. As I define HR work as a range of tasks that can be listed, described and taught, I have represented the work numerous times, to demonstrate this range. I have defined the experience of HR work as an ongoing and multifaceted stream of emotional experiences, like a continuum. These varying experiences are represented by the circular arrows beneath the tasks and the range of nuanced/graduated experiences (where I have added three descriptions of unemotional, emotional and deeply emotional to illustrate the various possibilities).

Figure 6.1: The emotionally saturated nature of HR work



The oval is outlined with a dotted rather than a solid line as emotional experience is not bounded but shifting. Experiences of the work can be influenced by various contextual factors; social, relational, cultural, and the professional norms of the job, which are shown outside of the dotted line. These factors can influence how the work is experienced; another reason for the dotted rather than solid line. For example, the task of making someone redundant is likely to generate strong emotions (in both the person on the receiving end and the HR practitioner) yet the professional expectation is to remain objective and by implication unemotional by following a 'fair' procedure.

Crossing the dotted line of personal emotional experience and the contextual factors are the three further features of this theory – the irreconcilable tensions, struggles and battles with the emotional aspects of the work, and the construction of emotions as unwanted/ 'emotionally dirty'. They cross the dotted line to demonstrate how they are influenced by the contextual factors. In summary, these various features of this theory explain how HR work is emotionally saturated.

Before I conclude by summarising this theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work, I next explain how participants navigated or coped with their work.

Navigating the experience of emotionally saturated work

That participants had to protect themselves from the emotionally difficult nature of their jobs demonstrates they acknowledged they risked damage to themselves from their work. Participants navigated their experiences in various ways. They perceived that in order to protect themselves from emotional harm and to protect the organisation from legal risk, they should show little or no emotion to others whilst being required to carry out tasks that could be emotionally painful for staff. Acknowledging they perceived themselves disliked, they were reduced to/became the HR role rather than human beings. They 'became robots' when encountering others' strong emotions, telling themselves to be 'thick skinned'. They told themselves they could not suffer illness or feel bereaved, feeling guilty even at the thought of doing so. Having to act as if they were unemotional was a way of coping with the strong emotions the work evoked in others and in themselves; the work and their experience of it interacted and influenced how they navigated the two together.

In addition to perceiving that they should express little or no emotion to others as one approach to navigating their experiences, this study also shows how participants distanced themselves from employees and from emotions (Clair and Dufresne, 2004), both theirs and the emotions others expressed towards them. They did this in three differing ways; through facial display and through physical and verbal distancing.

They wore a professional face like a 'protective shield' (Bolton, 2001) projecting unemotional displays they believed were required in each particular situation. For example, Natalie told herself to 'think blank face' whilst enacting her work. They were not performing emotion in the way theorised in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983)

where emotional expression is a required part of the job. Rather they performed a lack of emotion. Emotional labour focuses on the work itself (the requirements of the job/tasks) and how it is expressed, not the experience of doing the work. O'Brien and Linehan's (2014, 2018) empirical research into the emotional challenges in HR work (one of the few empirical studies that considers emotions in HR work) considers the work through an emotional labour lens. Whereas their study focusses on the expression and performance of emotion – such as how HR practitioners engaged in surface and deep acting of performing emotion in a 'backstage' occupation, the theory I have generated focusses on how the work is experienced. My study findings suggest emotions are experienced deeply by those in the HR role. Where O'Brien and Linehan (2014) argue that HR managers have an 'emotional balancing act' to do because of competing role tensions (having to be neutral yet being seen as responsible for people issues), I build on their work by explaining how and why these tensions are experienced and how they affected the HR practitioners in this study. My empirical work shows that emotions were experienced as polluting/disruptive to the work itself and therefore to be concealed. The irreconcilable tensions generated from doing emotionally saturated HR work which evoked strong emotions left HR practitioners damaged.

Physical distancing from emotions was also shown in this study as participants deliberately isolated themselves from non-HR staff (in private spaces/HR offices) using reasons of confidentiality and an impartiality requirement to provide 'balance' so positioned themselves in the middle of employees and managers. Verbal distancing was shown as they used and wrote scripts for themselves and managers who were required to have emotionally challenging conversations with employees, used humour to 'neutralise' talk about harmful emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Hatch, 1997), reframed negative work with positive narratives (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), and some talked about their emotions in the third person in the interview attempting to distance themselves from the emotions they recounted using their 'professional face'. On viewing their photographs together at the end of the interview, the realities of their working lives materialised in front of them. I have argued above that they realised they had exposed that HR work is experienced as emotionally saturated, when it should be practised as unemotional. Interestingly, in not wanting to present themselves as damaged, they did the repair work of re-

narrating their experiences as positive, thus mimicking their everyday work of disguising their emotions.

Thus in recognising that the work itself could be emotionally challenging, and that it was not supposed to be that way, participants find ways of navigating their work. Though they took various approaches to navigate emotionally demanding work, such as acting as if they were unemotional and distancing themselves from the emotions that surrounded them, they experienced them deeply.

The emotionally saturated nature of HR work

The theory I have developed explains that HR work is emotionally saturated because of the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced from doing ostensibly unemotional work. These tensions and struggles were identified by distinguishing between the 'work itself' (a range of job-related tasks that can be listed described and taught) and how that work is experienced (an ongoing and multifaceted stream of emotional experiences). Emotions are constructed as 'emotionally dirty' as they pollute the smooth handling of strategic decisions, interfering with the work and the professional appearance HR practitioners are required to adopt. Overall, this theory uncovers the emotionally saturated nature of HR work and reveals the emotional human being responsible for undertaking the work. The HR practitioner is not unemotional like the work is supposed to be, although study participants tried to act as if they were. They are emotional human beings who are responsible for handling other emotional human beings' strong emotions and who themselves may become emotionally damaged by those emotions. Work itself evoked emotions in the recipients of HR practitioners' work that were then directed towards the HR practitioner who, in response, deeply experienced those emotions but had to conceal them from others. HR practitioners thus found much of their work to be inherently *emotional*. This finding, therefore, contrasts with the taken-for-granted theory that HR work is unemotional by reason of it being procedural, objective and strategic.

Though I have shown that it is necessary to distinguish between work and experience, this theory understands that they interact with each other. As emotional human beings who experienced strong negative emotions directed towards them *resulting from the work itself,* they tried to act as if they were unemotional and behave like the work: work and experience interacted and influenced the HR

practitioners' behaviour. That is, as work and experience interacted and could conflict with each other, participants tried to distance themselves from 'polluting' emotions which risked disrupting the strategic focus of the work. In doing so they strived to conform outwardly to the theory of what HR work is. Yet inwardly their experiences differed. For example, participants perceived themselves disliked by non-HR staff because of the nature of some of the difficult tasks they were required to do: the work and their experiences of it interacted and conflicted because the work was not supposed to evoke emotion. Their perceptions of others' dislike for the work itself were conflated with their experiences and they felt disliked as the individuals responsible for the work. Staff disliked the work that HR practitioners are required to do; the HR practitioners felt that the staff conflated themselves and their work; therefore both the person and the task became disliked. Participants experienced negative feelings of sadness and loneliness (because of the nature of some of their work), experiences that they should not reveal to others. This became an ongoing emotional struggle where the work was not experienced as it *should* be; as an emotion-free neutral undertaking of tasks. That is, the tensions between the work and their experiences of it interacted, leaving them emotionally damaged. By contrast, prior empirical research into the wellbeing effects on HR practitioners as 'toxin handlers' found that being in such a role did not necessarily lead to damaging emotional effects on practitioners (Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014).

This theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work acknowledges the differing emotional impacts of the work on staff and on the HR practitioner. An unemotional task may be experienced unemotionally where experience mimics task; such as the doing of a mundane administrative procedure that does not evoke emotions. However, where work and experience interact and experience differs to how the work *should* be experienced, for example when doing a 'necessary evil' task that causes harm to others, emotions may be deeply experienced by the HR practitioner and concealed from others. Thus, the work generates varying emotional experiences depending on the nature of the work (such as the intensity of harm for others) and the emotions it evokes in oneself and others. Work and experience also fight against each other. The work tries to suppress emotional experience through the very nature of how it is designed (procedural, objective and rational). This is one of the reasons why HR practitioners in this study struggled, as they 'battled' with the

tensions generated by the work and their differing experiences of it. They tried to conceal the emotions evoked by their experiences of doing it, so as not to undermine their positions as (unemotional) professionals. It was because they absorbed these unwanted, intrusive emotions that the work became emotionally saturated.

In taking a social approach to study emotion, it is when work interacts with others and the surrounding world that it is experienced as emotional (Burkitt, 2014; Parkinson, 1996). Emotions were not experienced as one-off discrete events which 'neutralise' or control/suppress emotional expression (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995) but as an ongoing and multifaceted stream of emotional experiences. The 'unemotional' work was experienced as emotionally saturated as emotions bubbled beneath the surface of the HR practitioner's ideally calm exterior. If emotions leaked out they would reveal the emotional human beings they perceived they were not *supposed* to be; indicating the social and relational influences on emotion. HR practitioners are emotional human beings who are responsible for handling other human beings' emotions and are deeply affected by those emotions. This point is significant. The influential argument regarding the missing 'human' in HRM (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007) i.e. that human beings are missing from the practice and theory of HRM focuses only on one side of the work: the recipient of HR practices. The other side, the HR specialists who have relationships and interact with managers, employees and other HR staff and their surrounding world are also human and are missing from HR practice and theory.

Overall the theory that I have proposed explains how the nature of HR work is emotionally saturated. Given participants tried to conceal emotions in their working lives, accessing them in a research interview could be problematic. However, I found that the use of participants' photographs was a way of uncovering the emotional experiences of their work, as I next discuss.

Uncovering experiences of emotions through photographs

During the interviews photographs helped generate participants' narratives. Participants' photographs artistically represented their experiences of emotions, a form of mimesis (Walton, 1990), where they explained their meaning through language in the research interview. This study reinforces the view that photographs

are a way of enabling talk when more than words are needed to communicate intangible experiences such as that of emotion (Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014; Slutskaya et al., 2012). These visual prompts elicited resonant narratives that helped evoke feelings beyond available language (Boudens, 2005). Empirical studies using participatory photo-elicitation studies are scant (Warren, 2018); therefore my work contributes to furthering understanding of the value of this method in research.

Others' emotional experiences are not easily shared. Despite this, study participants recounted them to me in the interview both by positioning me as an objective listener who would not judge them, and also, as I will later explain, drew me into an encounter where we became two HR practitioners talking. However, participant-led photo-elicitation was chosen as a research method to help participants explain their past experiences of emotions to me (Bagnoli, 2009, Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014). The inclusion of participant-generated photographs contributed in three different ways to elicit rich data from participants' visual representations of their experiences of emotions. First, the photographs visually accentuated strong feelings where emotions were difficult to describe/label, second, they generated new and differing meanings, and finally, the use of smartphone technology further supported participants to articulate their internal subjective feelings in unexpected ways. I explain each point next.

Participants' photographs visually accentuated strong feelings they found difficult to describe/label. For example, feelings associated with being disliked were represented by images such as; a crocodile and a tongue-in-cheek slogan, feelings of isolation through the drawing of an island, empty offices, desks and a park bench, and feelings of frustration represented through a swearing emoji, a self-drawing of Anna's face with her mouth open, and a rubbish bin. The diverse nature of the photographs taken representing similarly labelled feelings demonstrates the subjective nature of emotional experience. The narrative tensions articulated through participants' accounts were also present in their photographs where, for example, Lorraine's smiling face masked her account of an emotionally demanding experience. Photograph meaning was ambiguous in isolation (Warren, 2018) and needed explanation.

Second, collectively the photographs generated new and differing meanings when viewed as a collage. For Anna, this led to a realisation there was a lack of emotion in her working life. Janet stated that through taking and viewing the photographs she realised that 'people' needed putting back into HRM. Accounts of participants' working lives were negatively oriented yet they tried to present a more positive 'professional' face when looking back on their experiences as they materialised in front of them. Differing meanings were generated from participants' earlier articulated narratives as they reflected on their photograph set where they reframed previously negatively articulated experiences as positive, highlighting the temporal nature of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988) and the shifting meanings of photographs when viewed at different points in time (Becker, 1998). Viewing all their photographs together led to 'a new way of seeing the phenomena studied' (Shortt and Warren, 2019, p.543) as participants re-narrated their experiences and offered new insights into their experiences of work. In addition, the participatory nature of the method overall enabled exploration of taken-for-granted experiences (Rose, 2016), where mundane objects such as boxes of tissues, in-trays and cups of tea led to the generation of narratives about emotional experiences which went beyond the surface meaning of the image the photograph represented (Rivers, 2019).

Third, the use of participants' smartphones highlighted unexpected ways photographs were produced using technology now readily available to participants in contrast to the disposable cameras used in photo-elicitation studies in the past (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). These images which went beyond photographs of objects and people in the natural world, allowed participants to extend their emotional vocabulary and express strong feelings which they could not replicate in the interview when recounting their experiences of emotion. Using smartphones enabled participants to photograph hand drawings they had made (such of a participant screaming), take screenshots of downloaded internet images, slogans, and cartoons, use photographs held on their smartphone photograph albums from personal lives, and crop/edit existing photographs. The visual images that participants created enabled participants to externalise their internal feelings in ways they felt comfortable with during the interview. For example, cartoons and funny/ironic slogans helped them critique themselves and the HR profession using others' words that they may not have been able to say if they were their own. A

swearing emoji face enabled Lorraine to express profanities in relation to her work without saying them out loud. A drawing of Anna's screaming face allowed her to visually express the intensity of her frustration without screaming loudly in the interview but enabled her to make more subdued wordless sounds. Funny images supported the humour they expressed verbally in the interview to externalise strong feelings that contradicted the humour – such as Catherine's cartoon image of what other people think HR practitioners do. These images allowed participants to articulate their internal subjective feelings not only when more than words were needed but when they could not say them directly because a vocabulary did not exist, and/or to articulate them verbally in ways that conveyed the strength of what they experienced in their working lives.

In summary, using a participant-led photo-elicitation method generated emotions that otherwise were difficult to articulate, enabling participants to externalise their internal feelings. Combined with their narratives which explained photographic meaning, emotions were revealed in the process of their telling resulting in rich data and insightful research into the experience of emotions in the work of HR practitioners.

The potential of mimesis and diegesis in narrative interviews

The second contribution of this study is methodological, involving development/refinement of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation. This involved combining photo-elicitation interviews with development of a method of data interpretation using mimesis and diegesis. Although photo-elicitation approaches are increasingly used in management and organisation studies and there has been a limited discussion of the promise of mimetic and diegetic approaches, the two have not been previously used in combination. Furthermore, the diegetic and mimetic elements required significant development to turn brief indicators into a fully-developed method.

This developmental innovation leads to the interpretation of interviews as sites of emotion-rich narratives in which researcher as well as interviewee is an active participant in developing/enacting the narrative. It was the data interpretation using mimesis and diegesis that 'revealed' how narrative tensions are experienced by both the participants and researcher in the interview. For example, focusing on mimesis

and diegesis illuminated not only what participants *said* about their emotions but also how they performed emotion in the interview. It also showed the ways in which the narrator (interviewee) encouraged their audience (researcher) to either reflexively experience their narrative with them or become a witness to it. This methodological approach demonstrates the value of paying attention to observing, acknowledging and interpreting the emotions expressed in interviews (both those of the participant and researcher), something that is underplayed in research.

The mimetic narrative refers to the content of participants' narratives, where the words and photographs participants use represent the drama of their working lives that is re-experienced in the interview through mimesis, or mimicry. Using mimesis I was able to make a representational connection to what participants said, enabling me to translate their narrative to understand the issues surrounding their experiences of emotions in their working lives. I not only witnessed participants' accounts but experienced them, which is why diegesis proved illuminating; especially when studying emotions. Diegesis refers to how participants narrated/retold their experiences of emotions in their working lives: their performance in the interview using 'poetic forms of talk' (Cunliffe, 2002) where, for example, they used sounds, gestures, metaphors, varied their intonation and played different characters to bring their narrative to life to their audience. In diegesis I reflexively experienced their narrative with my participants, such as through becoming engrossed in their narrative and a co-actor in their performance.

I found few empirical studies in the organisation studies literature that take a similar approach to narrative interpretation. It was necessitated by two observations. First, the narrative tensions between what participants said about their emotions and how they expressed them (for example laughing about feeling disliked). The second related to my positionality in participants' narratives; sometimes I became a fellow HR practitioner where I reflexively experienced the drama they narrated with them, other times I remained an academic researcher where I witnessed their accounts. I found myself shifting positions between 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). A mimetic/diegetic interpretation offered a way to understand these experiences. Other, more traditional approaches to narrative analysis were unsuitable. For example, discourse analysis places importance on the effects of

language in social interaction i.e. language is the object of study (Coyle, 2015), and narrative analysis typically places importance on context and the meanings people attribute to their experiences (Wertz et al., 2011). These do not help understand the contradictions I encountered in this study, and my own positioning within the action of the narrative.

In what follows, I illustrate the mimetic and diegetic narrative features through outlining the different chronological stages of the interview. These are; first, entering the interview space (mimesis), second, being in the interview room as a witness (mimesis), third, being in the interview as a co-actor (diegesis), and finally preparing to leave the privacy of the interview room (mimesis). Within this discussion I highlight the importance of observing, acknowledging and interpreting both the researcher's and participants' emotions.

Mimesis: Entering the interview space

On entering the interview space, study participants left their HR jobs behind them and became research participants who were in the interview room in order to retell their experiences of emotions to an academic researcher. My expectation was that I would witness their narrative, that is, listen, be non-judgemental, encourage and be an 'empathic listener' (Bennett et al., 2015). Apart from the initial nerves I experienced as I settled into each interview, emotions were revealed by participants sooner than I expected and this led me to experience differing emotions. For example, Lorraine's emotions were triggered by my act of laying the photographs on the table in front or her. She stated that she 'might cry' as there were some photographs of objects belonging to her parents and one of her with her father on her wedding day: she had informed me that her parents had passed away some months prior. We both laughed nervously, dancing around a sensitive subject as I checked she wanted to continue. Within minutes of entering the interview room, the interview had become a private space for the expression of emotions where the mask of professionalism had slipped and personal lives were revealed. I felt anxious about the possibility of tears, but they did not appear. Another participant, Natalie, very quickly revealed to me how she felt neglected by her boss, not listened to, and that she experienced negative feelings about her work (her first photograph was of the words 'negative, negative, negative'). I felt sympathetic towards her and wanted to offer some support/advice, but realised this was not the purpose of my role as

researcher; I was a witness to her account. We had no prior relationship which would have enabled her to say these things easily to me, but being in a private interview space where no-one else was listening she (like other participants) expressed emotions as they recounted emotions.

My mimetic interpretation offered a way to help me understand the significance of this. That is, I found that the research interview was not a mere discussion between two people. The interview room mimicked the spaces and places participants used outside the interview space to express emotions. Participants reported having to conceal their emotions in the workplace but expressed them in private places, in a cupboard, in the privacy of the HR office, in their cars or in their homes. The interview room, therefore, became mimetic of those experiences in those places. For example, participants reported on how they used humour in the workplace to 'let off steam' with HR peers, to help them cope with and 'neutralise' harmful emotions, an example of emotional distancing (Clair and Dufresne, 2004) which made their day-to-day experiences of emotionally difficult work appear less threatening or stressful (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Hatch, 1997; Wijewardena et al., 2016). The interview became mimetic of that experience as they laughed whilst recounting the experience of difficult work. This was further highlighted to me as I acknowledged the times when I entered into diegesis and became an actor in the drama of two HR practitioners letting off steam as we laughed together about the emotions experienced in the workplace. Here mimesis and diegesis overlapped. It is important to point out that mimesis and diegesis are not always separate and distinct from each other and that researcher and interviewee can move fluidly between the two positions, which can make data interpretation difficult.

People rarely share their feelings unless they are in a situation where they feel 'safe' to do so (Ellis, 1991). The interview room became a safe place to share the emotions of the job with a sympathetic listener, where the professional mask could be taken off and the painful realities of the job described. It was a place where participants could also hide away to express emotions they had to keep hidden in public. At these times they used me as their witness.

Mimesis: Being in the interview room as a witness

In this section I set out my experiences in the interview room as a witness to participants' accounts. In mimesis I experienced participants' narratives as an academic researcher. This was not an unemotional experience for me, though I detached myself from their narrative and hid the emotions I experienced as I did not want to influence their accounts. That is, I put on a performance in order to play my role as academic researcher. It will become clear that this is what distinguishes mimesis from diegesis: in the first the researcher enacts the formal role of researcher; in the latter she abandons that role. I use two examples to illustrate the tensions I experienced in mimesis.

During Alan's interview I experienced empathy due to the emotionally challenging nature of his job in the organisational environment of a hospice. I interviewed Alan in the hospice training room, and being there in that room, in that hour, left me feeling reflective. I had a sense of admiration for how difficult his work must be and tried to imagine what his experience might be like. What he said about his experiences made sense to me, I connected to his mimetic narrative, but I remained distant from it as I witnessed what he told me. I did not want to experience his narrative with him as I wanted to protect myself from the strong emotions Alan described having to handle. As Alan reported that other people said to him 'I would not want to do your job', I understood why they said that and privately felt the same. That is, I participated only as a witness to Alan's account, standing 'outside' it, and the emotions I experienced arose from my 'objective' viewpoint of an observer or witness.

Being in the interview room with Sophie at her workplace led me to experience different emotions as I witnessed her account. She said many things that resonated with me due to my past experience, such as leading HR projects to improve efficiency and productivity and having to carefully communicate them to staff, and implementing HR technology/systems that distance HR practitioners from decision-making that she perceived should sit with line managers, but then taking the blame for the advice given. In the interview I witnessed her 'professionalism' that she spoke about in her working life which was mimetic of how she behaved in the interview. Very few emotions were expressed and there was no 'performance' in the way she

told her narrative. I experienced little rapport between us but connected to her narrative; it made sense to me. Sophie positioned me as an academic researcher throughout the interview, not someone she could express emotions to in private spaces because she rarely reported doing so (until the end of the interview when her professional mask slipped as I asked her some closing questions and she realised there was not much emotion shown in her photographs). I did not want to become drawn into her narrative as it felt cold and unemotional to me. I had a strong desire to escape and felt relief as the interview ended; emotions that I hid from her. Though her narrative was reported in a way that was mostly unemotional I experienced it with discomfort. I was relieved to be no more than a witness to it.

Diegesis: Being in the interview as a co-actor

As I struggled with data interpretation I noticed that I did not only witness participants' accounts; sometimes I became a co-actor in their narratives. In this section I outline what enabled diegesis in the interviews and explore how it became possible to enter into a diegetic encounter.

My possession of inside knowledge of the HR profession led to a good level of rapport between myself and most study participants in the interviews. Sometimes I felt we were able to communicate beyond words and there were understandings between us that I felt I would intuitively know what was meant. I became more than an empathic listener when I was drawn into some narratives as an active participant. Traditionally, researchers are encouraged to take a neutral role in interviews, to facilitate and encourage participants to express their views but to 'keep themselves and their preferences out of the interview conversation' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016, p.71). However, being drawn into the interview was a critical part of the meaning-making process.

It was the way some participants narrated their accounts, their diegetic narrative, which drew me into them. They used gestural features (Shotter, 2008) such as; changes to intonation, use of pauses, emphasis, sounds rather than words, playing characters in different voices, metaphor and other poetic forms of expression that all made for a good story. At the time I was not aware of these features or that I was engrossed in their accounts. I enjoyed the experience and became lost in those moments that I came to understand as diegesis where I experienced emotions with

participants as a fellow HR practitioner. I had understood and connected to what they said (mimesis) but now I became a co-actor in their narrative (diegesis). I expressed empathy, defended participants when they reported being criticised, and laughed along with them when they made difficult work seem funny. Such was the rapport between us that I felt comfortable to add my own lines into their narrative (though this was not a conscious act). Laughter was one of the dominant expressions of emotions in diegesis. We laughed together about their work and I experienced a range of differing emotions that I later drew upon to interpret their accounts. The in-the-moment interactions between myself and participants; the gestural features, poetic forms of talk and emotions I later realised were significant to the meaning-making process (Cunliffe, 2002).

Data interpretation showed that humour and laughter was one of the features that enabled diegesis in the interviews. Little is written about how humour is used in research interviews by, and in interaction with, research participants. Exceptions include the observation that laughter is a way of building rapport between strangers (Lynch, 2002) where it helps to 'break the ice' (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) between the parties. As Glen (2003, p.52) states 'laughter is fundamentally social'. In my interviews humour went further than this: it was used in interaction to evoke emotion from the narrators' audience, drawing me, as audience, from the position of witness to active participant in their performance. For participants humour seemed to enable the expression of difficult emotional experiences such as dismissing staff. It was a possible way of protecting themselves from recounting the painful work they did, by making it seem funny. In diegesis I laughed and joked along with them. With some participants (Catherine and Anna) our laughter almost became hysterical. It was the strength of this emotional expression between us in the interview, as for example, Anna laughed about being shouted at that morning and wanting to scream, and as I experienced compassion that led me to defend her against the angry employee. This made the toxic nature of anger more manageable in the interview. I therefore became drawn into enacting the various forms of self-protection with participants, becoming not a researcher but a fellow HR practitioner who experienced with them the dramas and experiences they were recounting.

Though I *experienced* emotions in the interviews as a witness in mimesis, in diegesis I *expressed* emotions (another fundamental indicator of the distinction between

mimesis and diegesis). I expressed emotions such as disbelief/dismay, compassion, sadness and happiness. As participants drew me into their accounts and I entered into their narrative I experienced emotions along with them. It was only when I later came to interpret the data that I experienced emotions that conflicted with those I had experienced at the time. For example, when I had laughed along with Catherine's account about dismissing someone that I found hilarious in the interview, I later felt guilty as this should not have been funny. I had been swept along in her emotions which were contagious during the face-to-face encounter. Paying attention to my emotions both in the interview and during data interpretation and the tensions that I experienced helped me to understand that the meaning of Catherine's narrative went deeper than the laughter she expressed in the interview which had drawn me into her account. Laughter had been used in self-protection (both by Catherine and myself).

Mimesis: Preparing to leave the privacy of the interview room

The final way that the interview mimicked workplace experience came to light at the end of the interviews as I began the collage activity. As I did this participants left the private place where they felt safe to laugh about their work and express emotions, and returned to the formality of a research interview where they put their professional faces back on. Narrative tensions emerged as the interview was now representative of the emotions participants felt they *should* express as HR practitioners, not those they recounted experiencing.

In contrast to the negative representations of their experiences of HR work, participants began to re-narrate their experiences in more positive ways, where bad/emotionally difficult experiences were now 'learning opportunities' or 'challenges' to overcome. That is, when describing the negative experiences of their work they had experienced the interview as mimetic of a private space in which to express emotions; when viewing their photographs as a collection laid out in front of them they left that safe space and returned to the public space in which they had to be careful about what they could say. They re-narrated their experiences for their new audience, an academic researcher rather than a fellow HR practitioner, and so put their professional face back on; the one they wore in front of other non-HR staff in the workplace. Covering up those negative emotions that they do not allow themselves to display in public and reframing their narratives in more positive ways

was necessary repair work. Repair work that enabled them to return to their everyday working lives as HR practitioners.

I realised as I was doing the data interpretation that at this point I was no longer an active participant in their performance but had lifted myself out of it by asking them to do a research task: to evaluate and reflect on their photographs. I experienced frustration during the interviews as I felt participants were 'backtracking' on what they had said earlier in the interview. At the time I could not make sense of why they did this and I wanted to point out to them the contradictions in their narratives; to rewind the tape so they could hear what they had said earlier which was different to the new narrative they constructed. But I did not. I was in mimesis where I remained suspended above the interview, sat back in my seat, listening and trying to understand. As I later interpreted participants' accounts, paying attention to and remembering my feelings about this at the time of the interview was important. A reflexive questioning of what triggered those emotions (both participants' and my own) led me to explore the deeper meaning of participants' narratives (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001) and to the insight that this was repair work triggered by the narrative tensions that emerged from their experiences of their work. It was not just the content of what they said, that they wanted to frame their work in positive ways, but the tensions (both mine and theirs) that emerged through doing so that enabled me to understand their experiences of emotion in a deeper and more nuanced way. I took a reflexive approach to co-construct meaning by considering the relationships between myself and study participants, through exploring my own emotions evoked in the interview (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). For example, Catherine became self-conscious of her 'doom and gloom' photographs that mimetically represented her experiences. She was keen to impress on me that they were not representative of her overall experiences of her work and wanted to present herself in a positive light to me before leaving the interview. That she wanted to do so made me feel uncomfortable in the interview. I felt placed in an awkward position where she wanted me to erase what she had previously said or change it; that she wished she had not revealed so much because she had felt comfortable to do so as there was good rapport between us. During data interpretation I recalled these feelings I had experienced in the interview. I considered how they were triggered by the *way* she told her narrative. Both her mimetic and diegetic narratives together with

how I experienced them were important to my interpretation, as I realised that the last stage of the interview became mimetic of how she should experience emotions as an HR practitioner.

I have illustrated the mimetic and diegetic features of narratives, how I experienced participants' narratives as either witness or fellow HR practitioner, and the narrative tensions experienced by both participant and researcher. This developmental innovation leads to the interpretation of interviews as sites of emotion-rich narratives in which researcher as well as interviewee is an active participant in developing/enacting the narrative.

Mimesis and Diegesis: Interviews as emotion-rich narratives

The interview was not an emotion-free zone, despite dominant research methodological advice to the contrary (Broussine, Watts and Clarke, 2015). In some ways this is unsurprising. Narratives are inherently emotional (Boudens, 2005). People communicate intense emotional experiences as they tell narratives of their lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). In this study, the act of narrating their accounts about emotions elicited emotions (Ellis, 1991; Fineman, 2004). My study goes further, however, because my mimetic/diegetic interpretation also drew attention to my own emotions, those I experienced in mimesis and those I expressed in diegesis. I therefore demonstrate how interviews can be viewed as emotion-rich narratives, and that viewing them in this way can provide an enhanced understanding of the topic being explored. As participants performed the drama of their working lives in the interview they exposed the emotions they had to conceal in the workplace, and I became drawn into experiencing and expressing emotions with them.

The emotions participants expressed in the interviews were important as they provided insights into emotions experienced at work because of the opportunity to reflect on their workplace selves. This is important given the experience of emotion is 'recognised internally and constructed externally' (Ellis, 1991, p.22). By asking participants to remember and recall their experience of emotions, they constructed new emotions in the interview through recounting their past (Coupland et al., 2008). Meanings emerge from past events and multiple realities are constructed (Gustaffson and Swart, 2019). In this study, participants recounted their past experiences of emotions in the interview, and narrative meaning was gained through

firstly considering how they communicated details of their work and secondly through making sense of those acts of communication to understand what it was that they were communicating. Their act of re-narration at the end of the interview suggests the importance of highlighting the shifting nature of narratives in research interviews, that is, it could be an error to analyse only what appears to be the single, 'true' narrative because in the short space of the interview experiences can be narrated and re-narrated. Similarly our emotions can be described as 'slippery' (Lupton, 1998) because when we recount emotional experiences we cannot experience the same emotions or experience them in the same way as during the original, remembered experience. This is the difference between the original and the mimetic. Yet my study demonstrates that in the act of narration of emotional experiences new, rich emotions are generated, and through mimesis and diegesis it is possible to understand the relationship of these newly experienced emotions to the original experience.

As noted above, the emotions that participants express during interviews are rarely considered by researchers (Ezzy, 2010) because they do not fit within dominant approaches to qualitative data analysis such as grounded theory. The research process tends to remove or ignore emotions (Broussine, Watts and Clarke, 2015), such as during the act of data reduction in qualitative research. Researchers also tend to neglect their own emotions in organisational research, even where the topic of study is the emotions of the participants themselves (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015). However, considering the researcher's emotional response is a way of being reflexive, by questioning what is triggering particular feelings, and this leads to further depth of understanding (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001); a point some argue has been underplayed by researchers (Holmes, 2010; Munkejord, 2009). My methodology draws attention to the importance of observing, acknowledging and interpreting the emotions expressed in interviews by both participant and researcher. As Blakely (2007, p.65) suggests, acknowledging emotions in research 'opens up space for new questions, ideas and interpretations'. Interviews, this study shows, can become sites for the expression of emotion-rich narratives. Considering both the mimetic and diegetic elements of participants' narratives (which exposed both participants and the researcher's emotions) facilitated the required deeper and more nuanced understanding of emotion.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out the two major contributions of my work. The first is a theoretical contribution; the development of a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work. Through development of this theory I have revealed that HR work is inherently emotional rather than a taken-for-granted assumption to the contrary. The second contribution of this study is methodological; the development/refinement of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation which combines photo-elicitation interviews with a method of data interpretation using mimesis and diegesis which interprets interviews as sites of emotion-rich narratives. I have also added to the developing literature on photo-elicitation methods and shown how such methods can assist understanding of the experience of emotion in the research interview.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

This study sought to understand how HR practitioners experience and navigate emotions in their working lives. The purpose was to better understand how HR practitioners experience the emotional aspects of their work. In this concluding chapter I summarise my key findings arising from the primary research question and study purpose in order to demonstrate how I have addressed both through my empirical work. I next summarise the two major contributions of this study. Third, I set out the implications of this study for both HR practitioners and for researchers. Fourth, I reflect on my work. Finally, I discuss how exposing my emotions influenced the research and summarise what I have learned as a result of doing this study.

Key findings

This thesis shows that HR practitioners experience emotions deeply in their work. This led me to develop a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work arising from the irreconcilable tensions and struggles experienced from doing some of the work/tasks required. These tensions arose when supposedly unemotional work became inherently emotional. HR practitioners, recognising that the work itself can be emotionally challenging and that it was not supposed to be that way, use various strategies to navigate emotionally demanding work, such as acting as if they are unemotional and distancing themselves from the emotions that surrounded them (physically, verbally and through facial display). Emotions were experienced as polluting/disruptive to the work itself and therefore to be concealed. The irreconcilable tensions generated from doing emotionally saturated HR work which evoked strong emotions are potentially emotionally damaging to HR practitioners.

The study purpose was to better understand how HR practitioners experience the emotional aspects of their work. A key finding of this study is that HR practitioners, as emotional human beings, struggle with the tensions of appearing unemotional while experiencing deep emotions around their work. They are responsible for handling other emotional human beings' strong emotions and may themselves become damaged by those (their own and others') emotions. The emotional nature of HR work has been missing from HR practice and theory that has been preoccupied with the impact of HRM on organisations and/or on the recipients of HR practices. This study has developed understanding of HR practitioners' emotional experiences and has therefore achieved its purpose.

What are the original contributions of my work to academic knowledge?

The contribution of this study is twofold: first, the development of a theory of the emotionally saturated nature of HR work; second, the development/refinement of an innovative approach to narrative interpretation using mimesis and diegesis.

My theoretical contribution is original because it contrasts with the taken-for-granted theory that HR work is unemotional by reason of it being procedural, objective and strategic. Little is known about how HR practitioners are affected emotionally by their work and the new theory that I have developed explains why ostensibly unemotional work is experienced as emotionally saturated. My methodological contribution is innovative because although photo-elicitation approaches are increasingly used in management and organisation studies, there has been a limited discussion of the promise of mimetic and diegetic approaches where *both* are considered together as a framework to analyse research participants' narratives. Consequently I argue that interviews are sites of emotion-rich narratives in which the researcher as well as interviewee is an active participant in developing/enacting the narrative.

What are the implications of this research on HR practitioners?

This study supports existing research that shows that tensions and ambiguities in HR work still persist today. However, it is the emotional tensions inherent in HR work that have been uncovered through this study; tensions between the emotions HR practitioners feel they should experience as caring HR practitioners (such as empathy), those they should experience as a professional function (none), and those they reported experiencing that they concealed (such as frustration, anger, loneliness and shame). My findings suggest that HR practitioners may become emotionally damaged by the toxic emotions which are generated from doing ostensibly unemotional work that is emotionally saturated; from tensions in the work that are irreconcilable.

One of the implications arising from this study, therefore, is whether or not HR work can be less emotionally damaging to HR practitioners. I would suggest, first, that the surfacing of HR as emotionally saturated work can enable those who are considering embarking on a career in the HR profession to develop awareness of some of the emotional aspects of HR work. This may help them decide if HR work is the profession they wish to join when they are better informed about it. Second, there

are implications for those who are currently working as HR practitioners. I am not suggesting that the emotionally challenging tasks HR practitioners are required to do will stop, but uncovering HR work as emotionally saturated can enable them to better prepare and consider their own, individualised strategies for protecting themselves against harmful emotions that they are likely to experience. Participants in this study and in O'Brien and Linehan's (2018) work reported using HR peers to support each other and release strong emotions they could not express with non-HR staff, suggesting further consideration could be given to social support networks amongst HR peer groups (Rivers, 2019). Where they are sole practitioners in their organisation, actively seeking out support from local HR networks could help them navigate the emotionally demanding nature of their work. On an individual basis, HR practitioners could seek support from mentors/coaches but beyond this 'self-care' is not something I wish to prescribe here. The very nature of the term suggests it is unique to individuals and my participants used a variety of techniques to look after themselves (from meditation, to taking walks, to playing a musical instrument). Given that the emotionally challenging nature of HR work has only recently become a topic of academic interest, more research is needed which could specifically consider potential coping mechanisms to better support HR practitioners with their work. A further implication of this study is that it legitimates the expression of emotion in HR work. In other words, this study shows that it is not unusual for HR practitioners to feel emotionally challenged when doing their work, and expressing emotion does not make the HR practitioner incapable.

What are the implications of this research for researchers?

The methodological approach taken in this study required the researcher to consider her position in the research interview. Though I *experienced* emotions in the interviews as a witness in mimesis, in diegesis participants drew me into their accounts where I *expressed* and experienced emotions along with them. Being drawn into the interview was a critical part of the meaning-making process and my contributions became an integral part of my interpretation. My previous experience of having held various HR roles in different organisations contributed to a good level of rapport between myself and most study participants in the interviews. I found my prior experience was one of the enablers of diegesis. There are therefore implications for researchers who do not have a shared professional background with

research participants, where different forms of connection are made (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). It raises the question whether my methodological approach would be as effective if the researcher did not have a shared occupational background with study participants? Though this is not a question I can answer here with any certainty, it is something which requires future research and exploration. For my next research project I intend to replicate my methodology with an occupational group that I have no prior experience of, in order to further explore this question and build on my methodological approach.

Further reflections

Aiming to understand the subjective experience of emotion is not a straightforward task, as emotions are complex phenomena (Burkitt, 2014), yet my research approach uncovered emotions that might otherwise have been hidden. Denzin (2007, p.5) suggests that 'the labels applied to emotional experience are always shifting and are subject to new or different interpretation'. This became apparent when interpreting the interviews where I found that participants re-narrated their accounts at the end of the interviews and so did 'repair work'. This draws attention to the shifting nature of narratives in research interviews and how in constructing narratives about our lives we continuously re-narrate our experiences. Rather than limiting my analysis, this study captured the experiences as narrated by 11 HR practitioners at a point in time. I did not intend, nor is it possible, to generalize participants' experiences given my subjectivist problematic (Cunliffe, 2011) but theorised from them. This study provides an in-depth, nuanced understanding of HR practitioners' experiences of emotions where little has previously been surfaced in the academic literature.

On beginning this study I did not intend to present an overly negative or positive perspective on participants' experiences of emotion, but a negative one emerged from the data. Ellis (1991, p.35) asks whether we are 'socialized to think in negative terms when we consider emotion? Are feelings viewed as something to "get over"?' She suggests researchers may need to help participants consider positive as well as negative emotions. I proposed to participants that they take a balanced view of their experiences in suggesting they take five photographs representing good experiences and five of bad experiences of emotions. Despite this, the balance of their narrative

was negative; though when they became conscious of this on viewing their full photograph set in front of them, they reframed their negatives to positives, where their 'professional face' reappeared in conversation with an academic researcher.

The negativity of their accounts could have arisen for several possible reasons. Lindebaum (2017) suggests that in the workplace employees experience fewer positive experiences of emotion such as happiness than more negative experiences such as feeling frustrated, sad or angry. This may have been the case in this study and that is why participants reported negative emotions during the interviews. However, participants may have desired to take part in this study to share a negative experience to someone they hoped would listen where others had/could not, in which the discussion could become cathartic and release strong emotions that had previous been repressed (Vince and Broussine, 1996; Wiley, 1990). I was someone they could do this with; not being from their organisation and having both some understanding and experience of their job role.

How has exposing my own emotions influenced my work? Why has it had an impact?

> 'Most qualitative research efforts are inherently "emotionally intensive" activities' (Brannan, 2011, p.324).

On reading this quote soon after beginning my PhD studies, these words registered with me but did not resonate. I had not yet experienced the research process and was in what I look back on now as the 'honeymoon period'. Though Brannan's article is on the topic of researching emotion, he suggests most qualitative research is 'emotionally intensive'. I therefore wondered whether, as I was a researcher researching emotion, the intensity would be greater than if I were researching another topic (a question I was and am still unable to answer). As I demonstrated in the reflexivity section of my methodology chapter, I experienced emotions during each stage of my work; though it is not possible to know how/if I experienced emotions intensely as the subjectivity of emotions means they cannot be measured and compared objectively with others' experiences. However, acknowledging and sharing the emotions I experienced has influenced my work in numerous ways and was important to data interpretation which I next explain.

Exposing my emotions encouraged me to reconsider during data interpretation whether I was over-emphasising participants' negative accounts where I identified

the narrative ‘doing repair work’. Second, noticing my emotions that were triggered in the interviews as I was drawn into participants’ accounts signalled to me that there was a deeper layer of meaning-making required than I first realised. It led me to analyse both participants’ mimetic and diegetic narratives and consider how participants positioned me in relation to their narrative. Third, the assumptions I had held for many years about HR work, that I was doing good work, benefitting organisations (reducing organisational risk) and supporting staff, have become unsettled and challenged. Though I carried out the tasks required of me, they did not always feel comfortable. I noticed this when interpreting participants’ accounts; how some of them recounted feeling disliked and the associated emotions of doing difficult work. Feeling disliked only concerned me early in my HR career when I was keen to make a good impression; I later hardened to any criticism. The interactions and shifting relationships with my study participants, as I unsettled my own taken-for-granted assumptions about HR work, helped me better understand multiple perspectives on how HR work feels, that were sometimes similar, elsewhere different, to my own.

What have I learned from carrying out this research?

My main learning from carrying out this research is the need to be open to different possibilities as the research process progressed. For example, when I originally considered the methods I would use I had not considered using photographs, but following a research methods module where I was introduced to photo-elicitation I decided to test the method in my pilot study. I was encouraged by the rich data that emerged from the interviews using photographs. During one of the pilot interviews I spontaneously asked Elaine to consider all the photographs laid out in front of her and to group them into those she evaluated as positive and those as negative. Building this into the end of each interview led to further insight and a deeper layer of meaning-making. Developing a new method for interpreting narrative data was also not something that I set out with the intention of doing, but this emerged during data interpretation, as I noticed whilst both writing up and interpreting the data my shifting position in the interviews and the importance of my own emotions as well as those of the participants. Overall, from carrying out this research, I have developed my abilities as a qualitative researcher to enable me to fully understand the end-to-end process required to produce high quality, meaningful research.

This thesis offers a new theory of HR work as emotionally saturated. It involved a researcher experiencing a range of emotions in fieldwork with HR practitioners who drew her into their narratives of their emotionally saturated work.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Publications and conference papers arising from this thesis

Item 1 – Journal publication

On the following page the author accepted version is presented of an article published in final form as:

Rivers, E., 2019. Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves? *Personnel Review,* 48(6), pp.1565-1579. https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-07-2018-0244

Item 2 – Conference paper

Rivers, L., 2018. *'Capturing' emotions through the camera lens. Tea, toast and tissues.* In: Qualitative Research in Management and Organisation Conference: Praxis and Performance in Research. 27-29 March. New Mexico, USA. Available from: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/596f7886b3db2be5df6c6175/t/5aa1c1bb0852298804c30f08/1520550333880/QRM+Abstracts+P-Z.pdf

Item 3 – Conference abstract

Rivers, L., 2018. *Emotional reflexivity – just another way of 'managing' emotion? In: Qualitative Research Symposium: How Do We Belong?* Researcher Positionality within Qualitative Research. January 2018. University of Bath, UK. Available from: https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/qualitative-research-symposium-2018/attachments/qualitative-research-symposium-2018-programme.pdf

This work is extended in Chapter 3 – reflexivity section.

Item 4 – Conference paper

Rivers, L. and Cockman, R., 2017. *Cinderella's magic 'bubble of happiness': Taming destructive leadership tasks through storytelling.* In: 22nd Organisational Storytelling Seminar, 8 June 2017, University of Portsmouth, UK. Available from: http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/32182/

This paper (which was developed from data I collected for a qualitative data analysis module) is when I first considered the diegetic narrative – ideas that I later developed when doing data interpretation for this thesis in Chapter 3 – mimesis and diegesis.

This is the author accepted version of an article published in final form as:

Rivers, E., 2019. Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves? *Personnel Review,* 48(6), pp.1565-1579. https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-07-2018-0244

Navigating emotion in HR work:

Caring for ourselves?

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand how Human Resource (HR) practitioners subjectively experience emotions in their working lives and how they navigate emotionally challenging work.

Design/Methodology/Approach - A narrative methodology and participant-led photo-elicitation methods were used with five HR practitioners from different sectors to uncover experiences of emotion in their work.

Findings – Participants describe themselves perceived by non-HR employees as non-emotional human beings, expected to 'take' emotional expression from others, but display little themselves. HR practitioners use emotion-focused coping strategies, both self and team-care, to cope with the emotionally challenging work inherent in their role.

Research limitations – As a pilot study of five participants, further research is needed to strengthen the findings, however the in-depth qualitative methods used provide rich insight into their working lives.

Practical implications – HR practitioners' wellbeing should not be taken for granted or overlooked in organisations. Opportunities for informal networking with HR

communities and training/coaching interventions could provide support on approaches to the emotional challenges faced.

Originality/Value – This paper provides insight into how HR practitioners experience the challenges of their work, in contrast to mainstream research emphasising the impact of HRM policy and practices on employees and organisations. Attention is drawn to the subjective experience of emotion, rather than the mainstream objectification, managerialisation and generalisation of emotion.

Introduction

Human Resource (HR) practitioners hold emotionally challenging roles in organisations. They are expected to handle difficult and sensitive people issues (Frost, 2003), yet little academic research considers the impact and influences of performing the HR role on themselves or *how* they do this (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014). This is surprising given the welfare roots of the role and increasing contemporary interest in organisational wellbeing (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). In addition, HR practitioners are not at the forefront of emotion research because they are not in 'front-facing' service roles nor deemed to face particularly intense emotional or life and death situations. Within the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature debates persist as to where HR is positioned in organisations, further complicated by a plethora of role typologies (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012), rather than considering the experiences of practitioners themselves. The contribution of this paper lies at the intersection of HRM and organization emotion literature, uncovering the emotional challenges HR practitioners face in their day-to-day working lives. The aim is to better understand participants' subjective

experiences of emotions in HR work and how they navigate such work: an area under-explored to date.

Legge (1978) was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the ambiguous nature of the 'Personnel' role over 40 years ago. She found personnel managers' work reactionary due to a lack of success criteria, duplication with line managers' responsibilities, and role holders viewed as representing both management and employees. The shift from what was an administrative 'Personnel' function to an increasing strategic HRM focus in the 1980s and 1990s, aligned HR practitioners' work with organisational goals, arguably at the expense of employee interests (Hope-Hailey *et al*., 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010). Contemporary academic research continues to debate the tension and challenges inherent in HR roles, such as whether HR practitioners represent employee or organisational interests, what value they add as strategic business partners (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), and whether occupational tensions can be resolved (Cappelli, 2015; Sandholtz and Burrows, 2016; Sheehan *et al*., 2016). More critical perspectives suggest being aligned to organisational goals has diminished the focus on 'the human' in HR work (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010). Despite this, HRM theorizing is often in contrast to the reality of day-to-day working lives and few researchers consider HR practitioners' personal experiences, and even less their emotions. How does it feel to work as an HR practitioner? How do they subjectively experience and cope with the various emotional challenges they face?

A narrative methodology underpinned the study and interviews based on a participant-led photo-elicitation method used to access emotional experiences. This is a participatory method, where photographs made by participants rather than the researcher stimulated discussion (Meyer *et al.,* 2013; Shortt and Warren, 2017) and generated narratives around participants' subjective experiences of emotions in HR work. Thematic narrative analysis was used to interpret discussions, uncovering unexpected narratives of self and team care, as participants acknowledged that apart from themselves, the only people they could rely on for support in the face of emotionally-draining work were HR peers or immediate family.

This paper is structured as follows: Firstly literature is reviewed on organisational emotion and then connected with the HR role. Secondly, the methodology and methods used are justified, followed by an explanation of how the study was conducted and interpreted. Findings are presented as three narrative themes of difficult work, self-care and team care. The main implication is that, given the emotionally challenging nature of their work, those providing welfare/emotional support for others should not be overlooked.

Emotion perspectives

This section addresses three main threads: how emotions are theorized in the literature from a 'social perspective', the subjective experience of emotion, and approaches to navigating emotion.

A social approach to emotion in organisations

Emotions can be difficult to understand as “they are complex and intricate phenomena” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 15). Fineman (2003) groups emotion research into four broad and differing perspectives - biological, psychodynamic, cognitive and social – which covers a range of disciplines, philosophical approaches and methodological applications. Studies taking essentialist perspectives, such as psychodynamic approaches, are concerned with identifying, measuring and investigating individual and biologically-set emotions (Fineman, 2005) where emotions are distinct phenomena in themselves (Burkitt, 2014). Interpretive perspectives, in which this study is located, are concerned with what sits ‘outside’ individual emotion, for example generated through what is socially and/or organisationally desired, (Fineman, 2005). Social perspectives foreground cultural setting, feeling rules and scripts, language and social expectations (Fineman, 2003). Taking such an approach acknowledges that interactions with others cause emotions and the significance of emotion is evaluated in the context of relationships with others and their cultural importance (Parkinson, 1996).

In simple terms, the subjective experience of emotion can be explained as “how people say they feel”, which is observable and becomes an objective indicator of emotion (Scollon *et al*., 2011, p. 854). However, from an interpretive perspective experience is not detached, nor can it be studied as such. Experiencing emotion “locates the person in the world of social action” i.e. emotion both “refers back to” that person’s experience and is experienced in relation to others and the specific context of that experience (Denzin, 2007, p. 3). In addition, the subjective experience of emotion varies between individuals and may be shared. This places importance

on the meanings individuals give to their experience, assuming that what we experience as emotions are a sign of what is meaningful (Humphrey *et al*., 2015). This study will not objectivise participants' emotions by categorising them into universal groups like in psychological approaches to emotion (Turner, 2009), simplifying their meaning or experience. In adopting a subjectivist ontological positioning, meaning is located in everyday experiences and interactions between people and their world (Cunliffe, 2011). It is not possible to generalize participants' experiences and realities because they are situated in a context. Rather, the narratives shared by participants enable deeper understanding of their experiences, which can, and do, resonate with others.

Navigating emotion

Our experience of emotions can lead to efforts to alter the effects of that experience. Emotion regulation is defined as "the ways individuals influence the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross, 1999, p. 557). Such a definition implies emotions need 'managing' (Burkitt, 2018). Alternatively, coping can be defined as, "an individual's efforts to master demands (conditions of harm, threat or challenge) that are appraised (or perceived) as exceeding or taxing his or her resources" (Monat and Lazarus, 1991, p. 5). Such efforts or coping mechanisms are suggested conscious acts, a way of protecting the self from "the emotional consequences of adversity" (Cramer, 1998, p. 920). In other words not 'regulating' emotional expression or experience because an individual feels they should, but a means of coping with the stressor, or navigating that experience.

Coping mechanisms tend to be grouped into two categories, problem-focused and emotion-focused. The former occurs where attempts are made to take constructive action in relation to a stressor, the latter is invoked where it is perceived the stressor cannot be managed, and needs to be endured (Garnefski *et al*., 2001). Problem-focused strategies include; confronting the stressor, accepting responsibility and creating action plans, whereas emotion focused strategies include distancing and avoidance, self-control such as by keeping feelings private, seeking social support from others, and positive appraisal (Folkman *et al*., 1986). Emotion-focused coping therefore is a means of reducing emotional tension and/or 'managing' emotions within the self rather than the external stressor (Carver *et al.,* 1989). This does not however mean emotion-focused coping is always a solitary act. Seeking support from others, such as sharing emotions with confidantes or with a team, might be used for purposes such as "venting" or releasing emotions to others to gain their empathy or moral support, or in a more practical way to gain advice (Carver *et al*., 1989). Socially sharing negative emotions is suggested to lead to positive outcomes for both individuals and team members, strengthening existing workplace relationships (Yang and Kelly, 2015). Korcynski (2003) identified 'communities of coping' where call centre workers collectively released workplace tensions, away from the formality of management control.

Emotion in organisations and HR work

Though today emotions are seen to have a legitimate place in organisational life (Lindgren *et al*., 2014) they are still studied from a perspective of rationalisation and control (Bolton, 2005). Hochschild's (1983) influential research highlighted how organisations control emotions, where 'emotional labourers' display emotions on

demand, smile in customer interactions and demonstrate empathy towards angry customers. Though her work challenged earlier thought privileging the rationalization of emotion, it conversely demonstrated privileging the commodification of emotions for commercial gain (McMurray and Ward, 2014). Researchers tended to then view emotional expression in organisations as a phenomenon to be performed. Popularised theories such as emotional intelligence also suggest emotions can be recognised and managed (Goleman, 1995), and positive organisational psychology encourages a reframing of negative thinking to improve individual and organisational performance (Fredrickson, 2003). Organisational actors face pressure to adhere to organisational/cultural norms of emotional expression perceived 'organisationally desirable' (Fineman, 2005). Therefore 'un-desirable' emotions are not acknowledged or accepted as being part of day-to-day working lives.

HR practitioners' work is emotionally-laden. They are expected to handle difficult and sensitive people issues in an empathetic way (Frost, 2003), and be neutral fact-finder when solving employee problems (Steers, 2009). They regularly engage in emotionally challenging tasks impacting on employees' personal lives, such as downsizing (Clair and Dufresne, 2004), disciplinaries (Jones and Saundry, 2012), and bullying complaints (Cowan and Fox, 2015). They face emotions of employees and line managers, the latter who may lack the skills to carry out disciplinary action, requiring 'hand-holding' (Jones and Saundry, 2012) and extensive emotional support. Although these studies consider the HR practitioner role in such tasks, their emotional experience is not the focus.

Academic research has considered the impact of handling emotions on other occupations such as nursing (Bolton, 2000), healthcare professionals (Crego et al., 2013), counsellors (Mann, 2004); notwithstanding the emotional labour literature which extends into occupations beyond its service sector origins. Scholars taking an emotional labour lens consider the commodification of emotions, i.e. their control by organisations and the effects of such on 'emotional labourers' (Hochschild, 1983). Despite continuing popularity, some argue emotional labour has reached methodological saturation (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015). In contrast to emotional labour, this study highlights how HR practitioners subjectively experience emotion at work. It will consider how HR practitioners feel about their work, what meanings they give to that experience, what challenges they perceive in relation to their emotions, and how they cope with them. This requires a reframing from the emotional labour literature to uncover 'everyday' human emotions. In addition, empirical studies exploring the emotional challenges of the HR role are sparse with a handful of exceptions (see Hiillos, 2004; Kulik *et al*., 2009; Metz *et al*., 2014, O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, 2018), which are summarized below.

Hiillos (2004) identified five emotion-handling strategies used by HR managers, such as adopting mediating and counselling roles, and/or distancing themselves from employees' emotions. Her study restricts emotion to what HR managers considered 'crisis situations'. Two further studies focus specifically on the wellbeing effects on HR practitioners as 'toxin handlers' taking a psychological framing, concluding that 'toxin handling' does not necessarily result in stress or emotional exhaustion (Kulik *et al*., 2009; Metz *et al*., 2014). O'Brien and Linehan's (2014, 2018) empirical studies investigate the emotional labour of HR managers using grounded theory methodology. One significant finding is that HR managers are required to meet

emotion display rules to achieve tasks and support organisational relationships with line managers. In contrast to 'front of house' employees they argue the management of feeling is more complex due to the unscripted and autonomous nature of their work. Though insightful in highlighting external expressions of emotions against the emotional labour construct, their study emphasises how emotions are managed through control of their external display/expression rather than how emotions are experienced. In doing so, they overlook the unconscious and relational dimensions of emotion (Theodosius, 2006). HR practitioners' behaviours and emotional display expectations are categorised into roles, objectivising their feelings. By contrast, the present study provides a more in-depth, nuanced account of emotional experience i.e. how participants subjectively experience emotions and the relationships between people and the world around them. Having considered existing empirical work, the next section explains the methodology used to better understand subjective experience.

Methodology

Narratives are ways of communicating that enable us to know and interpret the world (Cunliffe *et al*., 2004) and therefore a narrative approach lends itself to an interpretive perspective. In seeking to access and understand the emotional experience of work, Boudens (2005) analysed narratives from secondary data sources about experiences of work, resulting in rich pictures of what aspects of work generate emotion. Intense emotional experiences were accessed indirectly through figurative language (Boudens, 2005), like how stories expose our emotions, (Ulus and Gabriel, 2016). This study aims to seek expressions of emotions in participants' narratives that help account for how HR practitioners, as Fisher (1984) suggested,

justify, guide and make sense of their individual lives. A subjectivist positioning, assumes those emotional experiences are subjectively constructed in an organizational context. This means a focus on content - what is said, and its context, in order to develop contextualised understandings of the narrative (O'Connor, 2000).

Photo-elicitation, where a photograph is used as a prompt to elicit opinions in a research interview (Harper, 2002), is a method that can uncover otherwise hidden emotions (Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014). Images can encourage talk when more than words are needed (Allen, 2015) as they, "mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews" (Harper, 2002, p. 23). Acknowledged as enabling a more in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, participant-led photo-elicitation is based on photographs participants themselves have generated that are then used to evoke discussion in an interview (Warren, 2018). There are challenges in encouraging participants to express 'private' emotional experiences through language alone (Sturdy, 2003; Wierzbicka, 2009). The words used to label emotions may not enable us to articulate the breadth of emotions experienced. Photographs can overcome this by acting as visual prompts that can extend the language and explanations available to participants, by surfacing their taken-for-granted experiences: experiences that both participant and researcher might otherwise overlook (Clark-IbáÑez, 2004). Exploring what might be perceived as mundane encourages thinking beyond the image of the photograph (Slutskaya, *et al*., 2012; Shortt and Warren, 2012). Participants gain the distance necessary for standing back and examining their own lives as they reflect on their experiences in a way they have not done before (through discussion about photograph meaning).

The Study

The in-depth pilot study with five participants reported here was part of a larger research project on workplace emotional experience. The participants held organisational HR roles at different levels, ranging from HR Director, Manager and Advisor, in a diverse range of sectors including Not-for-Profit (Hospice), Public (Further Education) and Private (Professional Services, Healthcare, and Transport). Participants volunteered through the researcher's personal network on LinkedIn. They were asked to bring up to 10 photographs which 'show how it feels to work in HR'. Each participant took between 7-10 photographs. At interview the photographs were discussed in the order taken by participants, to preserve any narrative sequence. Interviews were unstructured, driven by the participant's explanation of photograph meaning, each lasting between one to two hours. These in-depth discussions about photograph meaning elicited rich data.

The interpretive process

On completion of the interviews, photographs and transcripts of interviews were interpreted together as one body of data by the sole researcher. The first stage of analysis involved capturing image content or what the photograph was of (Edwards and Hart, 2004). The photographs ranged from cups of tea, tissues, in-trays and bins, to 'selfies', and photographs of hand drawings: stick people striking and an island. However, what the photograph was of was very different to what the photograph represented (Shortt and Warren, 2017). Participants stated the photographs 'represented' their emotional experiences yet in isolation the objects were meaningless (Edwards, 2002). As such, content-analysis of the photographs was not conducted as doing so would abstract it from the context and personal

experience it represented. Photograph purpose was to elicit participants' views and opinions about the topic; a dialogical approach (Meyer *et al*., 2013). Secondly, the researcher noted how participants labelled the emotional experiences that the images represented, then unpacked the subsequent narratives, highlighting quotes resonating with the topic of emotions in HR work followed by thematic narrative analysis.

Thematic analysis enables identification of patterns in the narrative, what Smith (2015, p. 216) suggests is a means of identifying, "the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story". However, Smith cautions against further breaking down the narrative into smaller codes to avoid fragmenting the narrative. The researcher therefore aimed to "keep the 'story' intact" (Riessman, 2008). Within narrative, thematic analysis prioritises content, 'what' is said, rather than analysing narrative structure or 'how' the narrative is told (Maitlis, 2012). Theorizing occurs across the participants' narratives, not solely in individual cases (Riessman, 2002).

Common themes were identified in the content of each narrative and across the five participants' accounts. This interpretive process was not about quantifying the number of occurrences of each theme, but highlighting "something important in relation to the research question" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82) and creating a resonant narrative. Narratives of isolation and an inability to talk to others about their work were important due to the confidential nature of the HR role. Participants faced the difficult task of enacting work on behalf of the organisation, which had emotional consequences for employees. Various coping strategies were deployed by the participants to navigate their work. Across participants' accounts, three common themes were identified: 1. doing difficult emotionally-laden work which resulted in 2.

self-care and 3. team-care. Participants shared having to look after themselves as no-one else would, using HR peers and/or their own line managers for support.

Alongside generation of themes, the interpretive process demonstrated the complexity of understanding emotional experience. Emotions were categorised in one way by the labels that participants gave each photograph. Yet when unpacked participants' narratives led to different emotions than those initially labelled, because they were interwoven within lived experience. The labelling of the photograph with an emotion was merely a 'way in' that revealed a more complex understanding of their working lives. For example, one participant struggled to label an emotion when describing his drawing of stick people on strike which represented 'conflict'. Unsure of the emotion he stated 'frustration'. He elaborated, explaining how he and other non-striking employees were required to cover for striking employees and he experienced feelings of guilt, justifying his actions as, "the needs of the business so I've kind of just put that front on really". In summary, emotions were not easily labelled, and in line with the interpretivist stance of this study, have a multiplicity of meanings.

Findings

Participants' narratives demonstrated a complex web of interconnecting emotions and experiences. The three narrative themes also overlapped when discussing photograph meaning. This is illustrated through narratives elicited from four photographs; stress balls, a box of tissues, a drawing of an island and a team photograph. The following four accounts were chosen from the rich data set as they demonstrate thematically coherent examples of the narratives and resonated with the researcher. All names are pseudonyms.

Account 1 – Feeling stressed and 'wonderful'

Alan is a sole HR Manager in the not-for-profit sector with 12 years' HR experience. One of his photographs was a bag of stress balls positioned on a copy of an HR magazine featuring a cover story about employment tribunal claims. Unlike the surface meaning of the image, a device to cope with a stressful situation, his narrative went deeper as he shared four separate narrative accounts, which stem from discussion about one photograph, expressing a range of emotion experiences.

[insert photograph 1 about here]

Photograph 1 - "stress relief"

The first was triggered by explaining the meaning of the photograph. An employee had threatened an employment tribunal claim and he shared his recollected feelings in response,

> I think maybe we were looking at early conciliation stuff at the time and I thought d'ya know actually I just need a stress ball, because I was so frustrated with that […] not with the early conciliation process but with the potential claim. I think I took that quite personally…I am a little bit like that, it's probably one of my faults, I'm, you're sort of, you do your best because you try your best with people, to get the right outcome and do things in the right way, when you get a knock back it can take you quite badly really, and I just, yeah, that just hit a chord with me.

He follows this with a second account of how he copes with such emotionally challenging work, articulating self-care,

> I've tried to rationalise things, logically and just sort of try and sort of have 5 minutes with myself, or I'll walk around the garden and just take a bit of time just to compose and sometimes you come back from a particularly stressful meeting, you just need a minute…you just need to just blow off some steam […]. I've got very supportive colleagues you know, I'm quite close to the Finance Manager because we deal with payroll a lot, so we quite often will sort of use each other I suppose.

The third account exposes the narrative theme of difficult work; illustrated through implementing a sickness policy change, and the emotions expressed towards him,

> When I was here 3 months we started consultations to reduce sick pay. And that I found really quite stressful because I'd never led on something like that before, I'd always been part of the process, never the person that's done the report, done the stats, told staff what was going to happen, gone through the consultation period, took the venom that comes back to you.

Alan is the recipient of employees' anger, experienced strongly as "venom" and further described as "quite difficult to handle…it was definitely stressful". He ends stating, "you just kind of pull through it and but I'm lucky I've got a supportive Director and also very supportive CEO", a social means of coping (Carver *et al*., 1989).

His fourth account articulates positive experiences with employees, "getting people back to work after things like mental health issues" stating, "the employees felt so good they want to hug you". He describes his feelings in response, "that shows you've done something right, through to supporting to getting things in place for them. So that's wonderful".

In summary, discussion about the meanings of the photograph elicited four separate identifiable but interconnected experiences. All three narrative themes emerge from explanation of photograph meaning, doing difficult work, both self and team-care.

Self-care is illustrated elsewhere in his interview, when discussing a different photograph's meaning, a cup of tea on his desk, where he describes the conscious act of taking a break to "sit back and just have a minute […] and to be comforted by a cup of tea". He acknowledges the importance of looking after himself, "if I don't look after myself there's no-one else that's gonna do that". Alan recalls a breadth of emotional experiences, from feeling hurt, taking employee actions personally to, "feeling wonderful". The complexity of emotional experience is illustrated through their varying intensity, from experiencing "venom" to other "difficult to handle" experiences. Different emotions are experienced simultaneously, for example feeling both frustrated and hurt. These experiences and emotions were elicited through discussion about a photograph of mundane objects.

Account 2 – Feeling unemotional

Anna, an HR Advisor in Education with 5 years' HR experience, discussed the meaning of a photograph of a box of tissues. She works in a small HR team alongside the HR Manager. Though on the surface it might seem an obvious choice of image, that tissues are used to comfort upset employees, her explanation of image meaning was unexpected,

[insert photograph 2 about here]

Photograph 2 – "sometimes you just feel like you need a tissue"

> Researcher: why did you take that photo?
>
> Anna: I think sometimes for two sides, cos obviously you're dealing with other people's emotions and sometimes a lot of the situations that you come across are quite upsetting, so it can be that side of it, being there to support an employee going through something difficult to advise and to comfort. Also I think quite often it feels like other people don't think you're a person, and you don't have *any* emotions…at all. So they feel like they can speak to you how they want and behave towards you however they want. I think sometimes you just feel like *you* need a tissue.

She illustrated further,

> Like today I've been shouted at by two people. I think sometimes people can be so incredibly rude to you and you're just expected to take what they've said to you and never are you expected to say, 'don't speak to me like that' or you know, 'if you'd like to come back to me when you're in a better frame of mind'. No, you just have to kind of deal with their barrage of abuse at you and then try and like smooth it over.

The photograph represents Anna's perception that others fail to see her as a human being and express emotions towards her such as anger that she experiences as hurtful (needing a tissue in response). She describes an expectation to 'take' others' emotions, i.e. remain neutral and not challenge back, even to a "barrage of abuse" but neutralise the emotion or "smooth it over". Like a tissue, she absorbs strong negative emotions from others. Her earlier discussion about photograph meaning suggests that privately she might express her 'true' feelings as the tissues are used to wipe away her own tears, a visual reveal of her private self-care. She perceives no-one else would think to care for her.

Account 3 – Feeling "like Switzerland"?

Anna also made a drawing of an island which she photographed, describing its meaning as illustrative of the difficult position HR practitioners hold trying to be 'neutral' parties,

> I think me and my boss would describe how we try to be at work. It's not a great depiction of this cos that's just an island, I drew an island, but like

> Switzerland. So well, we say that's how we're supposed to be but I thought an island is a nicer drawing. Because you've got to be impartial on both sides.

[insert photograph 3 about here]

Photograph 3 – "trying to be an island"

The role expectation to hold confidential information led to feelings of isolation,

> I think like from an emotional point of view as a person, I think…trying to be an island and be so that people can come to you for advice, know that it's going to be confidential, trust in you for giving good advice but also trusting you to be confidential...it can be quite isolating that's why I drew a little island […] it can be quite lonely, particularly as we're such a small department.

Using positive reappraisal with her boss illustrated team care/social coping (Folkman *et al*., 1986), but Anna's perception was that they had no friends at work due to the confidential nature of their work,

> We want to be good at our jobs, we want to do a good job, we want to be positive, so to try and keep doing that in an environment that doesn't really want that, can be….so it can be both, it can be 'right come on we're gonna, let's not let this get to us, let's not let it get us down' and it's like 'we've got a good way of working, we're gonna be positive, we're gonna make a difference, we're gonna change things'. But then it can be like 'ooh we're on our little island; we've got no friends'.

Despite having each other, her final sentence suggests loneliness. Her perception is of being 'outsiders' despite being organisational members.

Account 4 – The "mindfulness mantelpiece"

Sarah is an HR Director in Professional Services with 10 HR staff. Her “support network” was her HR team, who created an informal social space,

> So we decided to make a fireplace out of boxes, cos we’ve got a lot of space and a lot of walls, and they were a really creative bunch my team, so they actually started making bricks, and sticking them on …. And we now have the sofas around it. So we’ve taken all the Christmas decorations down but we’ve kept it because it’s quite nice to go and sit there occasionally and have a debrief. Which is nice. Time to talk […]. We did quite a lot of mental health last year, because mental illness was our charity of the year […] I think since then we’re all very much more sort of open to say, ‘hey, how are you doing?’ and checking in with people and things like that, which is nice. But yeah generally the team are great. They’re very supportive of each other, they have to be, and of me.

She brought to interview a photograph of a photograph which sits on the makeshift fireplace her team call “the mindfulness mantelpiece” (not reproduced here for reasons of anonymity). The photograph shows Sarah with her smiling team, wearing Christmas jumpers. Initially describing photograph meaning as pride in her team, her narrative is one of team-care where the HR team use this space as respite from difficult work because “they have to”. These last two accounts contrast emotional experience: the homeliness of the hearth and relating support versus the isolation represented by the island. This demonstrates the relational and contextual nature of the subjective experience of emotion.

Discussion and conclusion

This section sets out the relevance of the findings in relation to the emotional experiences of HR work, before concluding with some implications for organisations. Participants selected photographs which elicited narratives surrounding their emotional experiences, signalling what is meaningful for them (Humphrey *et al*., 2015). Photographs of mundane objects visually revealed their personal feelings about their experiences of work, and discussions about their meaning highlighted the

unconscious and relational dimensions of emotion (Theodosius, 2006). These experiences are constructed in relation to the social and cultural context in which they found themselves. For example, as HR manager leading consultations to reduce ‘sick pay’, Alan found himself in unfamiliar territory, solely responsible for implementation. He perceived himself, not the Directors that asked him to make the changes, as the target of employees’ angry responses, because they were not present in employee consultations. Rather than assuming that HR tasks are devolved to line managers, thereby removing emotional encounters from HR practitioners’ work (Renwick, 2003), in a small organisation this was his responsibility. He accepted the task as something he had to “just kind of pull through”, failing to acknowledge that he sought emotional support from the organisation’s Directors who had set him the difficult task.

In contrast to critical HRM scholars accusations that HR practitioners’ alignment to organisational goals has diminished their focus on the human (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007), participants’ perceived other employees as treating them as non-emotional human beings. They perceived themselves a face-less HR function, expected to ‘take’ emotional expression from others, but display little emotion themselves. Non-HR employees were less conscious of expressing their feelings. Participants articulated emotion-focused coping strategies, a sense of having to ‘endure’ the stressor rather than take action to change the situation they found themselves in (Garnefski *et al*., 2001). For example, conscious self-care where they acknowledged the need to “have five minutes with myself”, or have a cup of tea, signalling a need for individual or social respite (Stroebaek, 2013). These coping strategies are examples of ‘escape - avoidance’ where people make “behaviour efforts to escape

or avoid" and of self-control, by keeping their feelings private (Folkman *et al*., 1986, p. 995).

Of course, they are not the only employees who might use such strategies but participants articulated specific organisational conditions more difficult to navigate due to the expectations of their role. For example, the confidential nature of their work resulted in being able to 'vent' or makes friends with few people outside of HR teams. Being the person to whom others felt they could express their anger towards, participants felt they could not express their 'true' feelings back in response. However, they relied on social support as a further emotion-focused coping strategy (Folkman *et al*., 1986). In smaller teams, this was with one or two HR colleagues or confidantes outside the HR function. Where the context was a larger HR team this was easier, and in Sarah's case physical space was created for social and emotional support amongst HR peers. Fineman (2003) refers to such informal spaces as 'emotionalized zones' to share and express emotions, rather than deliberately designed break-out spaces. In these spaces HR peers came together like Korcynski's (2003) 'communities of coping', to socially share negative emotions (Yang and Kelly, 2015) and experiences. When they remembered they took time out for themselves, either individually or in peer groups, using devices to protect the self from harmful emotions (Cramer, 1998). Though academic research argues emotions are now legitimised (McMurray and Ward, 2014), this study highlights use of techniques that rationalise the expression of negatively perceived emotions; compartmentalised to 'safe' physical spaces or reframed through 'positive appraisal' (Folkman *et al.,* 1986) where they "put on a front", or "tell themselves to be positive".

Given that the study's aim was to understand participants' subjective experiences of emotion, from an interpretivist epistemological positioning, possible interpretations

are offered with a multiplicity of meanings. As Denzin (2007, p. 5) states, “the labels applied to emotional experience are always shifting and are subject to new or different interpretation”. It is therefore not possible, nor was it intended, to generalise their experiences. However, expressions of emotions in participants’ narratives were identified that help account for how HR practitioners in this study justify, guide and make sense of their individual lives. In communicating details of how they do and make sense of their work, they exposed the complexity of emotional experience.

This paper contributes to HR research by furthering understanding of how HR practitioners experience and deal with their emotions, thus ‘humanizing’ them. It fills a gap in HR research, which tends to be objectivist and focused on roles and practices. Previous research into how HR practitioners do their work is limited (O’Brien and Linehan, 2014). The study’s findings are significant in highlighting how HR practitioners engage in emotion-focused coping strategies of self and social support to deal with the emotional stress they face in their work. In addition, as studies using participatory photo-elicitation methods are sparse (Warren, 2018) this paper highlights a means of accessing emotional experience, bringing the visual into discursive narratives.

The unique nature of HR practitioners’ roles in terms of dealing with a range of emotionally-laden activities sets them apart from other employees. As a result of the study findings, it is proposed that organizations should acknowledge the challenges that HR practitioners face in taking steps to address their own welfare without affecting their organisational credibility. Managers of HR teams should consider their welfare, rather than only ensuring they attend to the welfare of others in organisations. Training and coaching interventions could help in handling emotionally demanding situations (Richter *et al*., 2016). For example, how to address emotional

challenges and the isolation HR practitioners may feel through professional support networks that could provide a forum for discussion, to not only 'vent' but also gain advice and socially share experiences.

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Appendix 2 - Study timeline

2015

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
			PhD programme commenced (Sept)

2016

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
Pilot Study 1 (Jan)			

2017

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
	Pilot Study 2 (June)		
	Data Collection (June 2017 - April 2018)		

2018

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
	Stage 1 - Data Immersion April - July		
Data Collection (June 2017 - April 2018)		Interpretation and experimental write-up of data - July to April 2019	

2019

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
Interpretation and experimental write-up of data – July to April 2019	Re-writes/editing of data write-up May – September		November - December 2019 - Phase 2 Interpretation

2020

January - March	April - June	July - September	September - December
Final write-up			

Appendix 3

Participant information sheet – [Date]

Research Project title: An exploration of how HR practitioners experience emotions in their working lives.

Dear [Name]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study which will contribute to my PhD research exploring how HR practitioners experience emotions in their working lives.

Ahead of the research interview, please take up to 10 photographs on your mobile phone that **show me how it feels to you to work in HR.**

The choice of image and/or location for taking the photographs is entirely up to you. For example these may be photographs taken either in or outside of your workplace that reflect how it feels to work in HR. The photographs, for example, might be of objects, people or places that represent how it feels to work as an HR practitioner.

If taking photographs in your workplace, please take care not to include any objects or people that would make your organisation identifiable as your participation in the research project will be anonymous. Wherever you are taking photographs, be sensitive to capturing a photograph of someone who may not want to be photographed, or ask their permission first.

If you need some ideas to get you started you could consider capturing a few images that represent your best experiences of how it feels to work in HR and a few images representing your worst experiences of how it feels to work in HR.

If you would prefer to draw an image representing your experiences you can do so, but please can you then take a photograph of your drawing.

What do I need to do when I have taken the photographs?

Ahead of our interview on [insert date and time], please can you upload the photographs by [insert date] to [insert location]. The photographs will only be accessible to you and me.

What will happen at the research interview?

During our research interview, I will bring printed out copies of the photographs for us to discuss. I anticipate the interview will last around 1 hour to 90 minutes. The interview will be tape recorded and later typed up. The typed copy will not include your name or any identifying information that you wish to be excluded. I will provide you with a form to sign to confirm that you are happy to go ahead with the interview before we begin.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. If you have any further questions, please contact me on [email address].

Liz Rivers

Appendix 4

Participant consent form

Title of Research Project: An exploration of how HR practitioners experience emotions in their working lives.

Name of Researcher: Liz Rivers, University of Bath School of Management

Participant Identification Number: xxxx

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
2. I agree that my interview will be tape recorded. Typed records will not include any identifying information, such as your name, your organisation's name and anything else you wish to be excluded.
3. I understand that my responses will be held and treated in the strictest of confidence. I give permission for Liz Rivers to have access to my anonymised interview transcript. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials and I will not be identified or identifiable in the resulting research.
4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research.
5. I understand that the photographs I have taken are my own property and if they are used in the research, I give my permission for them to be published in the author's thesis or in future research.
6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Date Signature

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Date Signature

Appendix 5

Participant pen portraits

The following section overviews the study participants. The table below summarises factual information about each participant followed by pen portraits of each to provide background to their narrative ahead of the data interpretation chapters.

Summary of participants

	Pseudonym	**Job title**	**Industry sector**	**Number of years HR experience**
P1	Elaine	HR advisor	Healthcare	4
P2	Anna	HR advisor	Education	5
P3	Alan	HR manager	Healthcare	12
P4	Jack	ER advisor	Rail	3
P5	Sarah	HR director	Professional Services	18
P6	Ruth	HR director	Manufacturing	25+
P7	Natalie	HR advisor	Education	10
P8	Janet	HR advisor	Engineering	15
P9	Catherine	HR business partner	Chemicals	12
P10	Lorraine	Head of HR projects	Housing	25
P11	Sophie	Senior HR business partner	Council	23

Elaine

Elaine is an HR advisor in the healthcare sector with four years' HR experience. She originally joined her organisation on an HR graduate training programme, describing her present role as her 'first proper HR job and states 'I really like working in HR, I enjoy it'. She supports three HR business partners (HRBPs) for approximately 1400 staff. When I ask her about the emotions she experiences at work she states:

> I think you feel every emotion at work. I do. In HR and well in life in general you do. Erm, you feel nervous, I feel nervous in HR. That, that sicky feeling that you get when you're going in. Erm, I feel enjoyment and fun, erm, blood

> boiling (laughs), frustration, erm so I think you do go through all, all emotions, but in general I find it a really nice and happy place to work.

Her articulated emotions relate to both her organisational context and towards formal HR procedures where she interacts with managers and employees. Her statement summarises the breadth of emotional experiences her narrative encompasses – from nerves, enjoyment, anger and frustration to happiness. However, overall the strongest narrative theme arising from her account emphasises the care that she as part of the HR team, is expected to provide to others:

> It's the support side of it as well isn't it, and making sure that people know that we care as an organisation, cos we have so much change … that sometimes I think they feel … that we don't actually understand and don't care, and actually we do …

Her positive feelings about the organisation stem from her perceptions of good treatment by the HRBPs; how they developed her from graduate into HR advisor, 'I've learnt so much from them, that they've built me as well' and their intention to promote her into an HRBP role in the future.

Anna

Anna is an HR advisor with five years' HR experience currently working in the education sector. Her prior HR experience includes roles in the third sector and manufacturing. In her present role she supports 350 employees over four sites alongside the HR manager, where she is responsible for outsourced payroll and a full generalist HR remit which she describes as:

> It's never ending, and you're pulled like, I think you're just pulled in so many different directions. You're constantly jumping from one thing to the next to the next to the next. So like we cover everything: reward, recruitment, erm … I'm trying to think, pensions (laughs), payroll, erm, what else do I do? Case work, ER, anything (laughs) comes across my desk.

She sets out her perception of how HR is viewed in her organisation stating:

> We are pulled so thin and we aren't appreciated either. […] Nobody really understands what we do, nobody appreciates the scale of what we are responsible for, and so sometimes it can just be quite … euch.

Others' negative perceptions of HR, and her own articulated experiences of her work, such as feeling isolated, blamed for delivering organisational bad news and expected by staff to respond to them unemotionally, dominate her narrative.

However, she states that she ‘really likes HR’ and ‘loves the variety, you get to … help people’, which is why she entered the profession originally.

Alan

Alan is an HR manager with 12 years’ HR experience working in diverse sectors such as steel, logistics, sales and education. He is currently HR manager in a hospice with two HR administrators. He describes his role as:

> Very varied […] there’s a lot of low-level employee relations issues that do kind of mushroom and develop if you’re not careful […] there was never a HR manager before (me) which means that a lot of the things are loosely in place but not very well defined.

The organisational context is important in relation to how he is expected to feel about HR work and what he can do:

> The ethos (of the hospice) matches I suppose what, how I am, I feel, erm I think some people, I think you sort of sometimes fall into HR because you’re perhaps a caring person initially and then you realise when you get into it you actually have to be quite hard about things. But I think working here allows you to, to do a bit of both.

In contrast to the hospice which provides care for chronic and terminally ill patients, in HR work Alan states caring and having ‘to be quite hard about things’ are both required, articulating a perceived contradictory requirement in how he approaches his work. He describes the ‘emotional drain’ he sometimes experiences where:

> It can be quite a difficult place to be for, for inherent stress of working in a place where people are often coming to die, but then you’ve also, you get the transference from staff as well when you’re dealing with them with their issues, but rewarding as well.

He describes various coping mechanisms he uses which enable him to respond in ways he perceives as ‘pragmatic’, ‘balanced’ and rational.

Jack

Jack is an employment relations (ER) advisor in the rail industry with three years’ HR experience, and has worked for almost two years in his present role. His prior HR experience is working in recruitment at his current organisation and in healthcare. I ask him how it feels to work in HR and he replies:

> It's good, it's erm, there's loads of different aspects to it and I feel that I want to progress, but I need to do a lot of parallel moving to be able to do that, if I want to yeah, to go up anymore really.

As a recently CIPD qualified HR practitioner, his career development and progression to ultimately a more senior HR role is important context relevant to his narrative. This is a recurrent thread in his account used to justify doing and experiencing various emotions in his work. For example, when asked if he is proud to work in HR, following discussion about a photograph he shows me of organisational awards that represent pride he states:

> Yeah, I think so, yeah. Erm, I'll probably be more proud once I'm, well if I get to a higher level than I am now. Erm, cos at the moment I'm doing a lot of sort of 'adminy' stuff as well as the management side of it. But yeah, if, if I know that there's a good progression route then yeah I'll definitely be proud to be, to be in the, in that field, yeah.

As an intermediary between the trade unions and the management team his role places him in a difficult position in the organisation, though his articulated emotional experiences range from 'not affecting me too much' to stressful, feeling bored, to externally showing he is 'happy to help' when faced with lots of questions from staff and their representatives.

Sarah

Sarah is an HR director in the professional services sector, responsible for 10 HR staff. She has 18 years' HR experience and was promoted into her current role four years ago. She explains she 'fell in love with HR' when temping in the training department of a different organisation, as she liked that the role combined her experience from her law degree with 'liaising with people', describing it as 'a bit of everything'. Her current organisation has grown rapidly in size, but whilst on maternity leave she returned to an HR function that was 'pretty much demolished' by the firm's partners. However, she has since built the department back up, viewing her role as 'managing the HR function' and to 'lead the liaison with the board, the strategic projects' rather than 'doing any of the day-to-day stuff', which is her team's responsibility, though 'at the end of the day if something goes wrong it's still your culpability'. This statement suggesting she may take the blame for mistakes sets the tone for her narrative, where her relationships with the firm's partners and the decisions they make influence her experiences of emotions.

She describes contrasting experiences and outcomes of doing HR work. On the one hand she states ‘sometimes it can be the best job in the world. Sometimes when you launch a new initiative and it’s good’, yet she describes tasks she finds ‘heart-wrenching’ such as redundancies and office closures, where she sees her role is to ‘minimise the impact’ and make it ‘as good as it could be’.

Ruth

Ruth has been a board-level HR director for the last three and a half years for a manufacturing company which is a small, medium sized enterprise. She has 25 years’ HR experience in a range of different sectors such as healthcare, retail and rail. When asked how she feels about working in HR she states:

> Right now it’s fabulous. It makes you get up in the morning. Whereas, er three years ago, three and a half years ago, if you’d have asked me that question, I would have said, ‘it’s the pits of the earth, and I absolutely detest it. I hate it’.

Prior to joining her current organisation there were minimal HR practices in place, so she had a ‘blank canvas’ to implement HR policies and practices, describing what she has delivered over the last three years as ‘colossal’. Though she started as the sole HR employee in her present organisation, she has subsequently appointed an HR administrator to support her, who she is developing to become HR manager in the future. She enjoys supporting others ‘people are at your door all the time’ but she also feels supported by her boss and peers. Having positive working relationships with managers and being perceived and feeling equal to her peers on the board is an important thread through her interview. She states that ‘I love my job, it makes me feel needed’.

Natalie

Natalie is an HR advisor in education with 10 years’ HR experience gained in various public sector organisations, before moving to her current role three years ago. On leaving school she completed an apprenticeship to become a chef but did not enjoy her work and moved into HR by chance, after meeting someone who worked in HR. She completed various HR qualifications to achieve CIPD status and a master’s degree in HRM. Her thirst for self-development is a thread that runs through her interview as she explains she is currently self-funding three other qualifications in her own time, in mental health awareness, education and training, and in counselling,

because she says at her workplace ‘we get nothing (no self-development)’ so ‘I’m doing this for *me’*.

Natalie works as part of a team of four HR staff reporting directly into the HR director. The organisation is due to undergo a merger in seven days’ time following our interview, and employees are concerned about job security as they have not been told if their roles will remain post-merger. She is critical of her boss who she infrequently interacts with and who rarely responds to emails from the HR team. At the time of our interview, Natalie is actively looking for another job. As well as feeling insecure in her current role she states ‘I’m now at a point where I’m done with being a HR advisor, you know, it’s, it’s draining, it’s really negative’.

Janet

Janet is an HR advisor with 15 years’ HR experience and semi-retired. At the time of our interview she works in a global engineering firm on a temporary contract alongside another HR advisor, both reporting into the HR manager. She has previously worked in the engineering sector as an HR manager and is critical of the ‘very old-fashioned, traditional’ culture she experiences in her current firm despite them trying to modernise, and is frustrated by how they and the HR manager ‘micro-manage people’. She began her career in higher education before taking time out to have a family. She later returned to work in an employee engagement role, completed her CIPD qualification and then moved organisations where she held roles in staff development and in equality and diversity prior to being made redundant. She then shifted to temporary HR work to suit her personal life.

She states that ‘values and ethics’ are important to her, having a social purpose that she can identify with, which influences which temporary roles she takes on based on her past experiences in different sectors. She describes herself as ‘very experienced’ and that moving between different organisations has enabled her to ‘build up enormous resilience’. She is critical of other HR practitioners who are ‘completely transactional’ and how technology ‘takes the emotions out of people, so that some of the HR people, they become like robots’.

Catherine

Catherine is a field-based HR business partner who has worked for the last three years in a multi-national chemicals manufacturing company, ChemCo. She has 12

years' experience in HR and learning and development (L&D) roles. Her feelings about working at ChemCo are stated as 'I love the company, I love working there, we're very people focused, it's, it's a nice environment to work in'. She began her HR career in an L&D leadership role, before moving to a telecoms firm with line management responsibility. Whilst there, she made a deliberate transition from L&D into HR by handling employment relations cases as a line manager. Her operational management role was doing '100% HR focused work' as a 'trouble-shooter' where her role was to 'go into underperforming teams and either manage them up or out, depending on what needed to happen'. However, she felt perceived by others as 'a bit of a hatchet person' where 'people start keeping you at arm's length' and later took voluntary redundancy.

She states that she enjoys HR work, despite it being stressful, and that people that do not know what HR work is 'think that anything to do with HR is just fluff' but 'the reality is people only get you involved when there's something wrong'. She describes her experiences in her current role as 'chalk and cheese' due to the two main manufacturing sites she supports – one is 'the swot of the class' and the other is a, 'really naughty child', both with very different 'HR needs' from her.

Lorraine

Lorraine is a head of HR business partners with 24 years' HR experience. She has spent the last nine years working for a housing group (HouseCo) in the not-for-profit sector, five of which in her current role. She began her HR career in the travel industry (TravelCo). She made her decision to work in HR after doing an online careers module at university where HR came up as a 'match' when:

> Things like working with people and HR always came out (of the online careers test) but as did things like nursing, and that sort of working with people and that, and I'm not that caring … of anything, although I'm sure nurses probably think they're not caring, in the same way that people think HR is a bit of tea and sympathy and actually it's not, is it? (Laughing)

At TravelCo she worked her way up through HR administrator, advisor and manager roles, culminating in post as head of HR projects. A significant part of this role and her 'most challenging experience' was a merger with another company where she was required to lead closure meetings, plan the redundancy process and carry out both group and individual one-to-ones with affected employees. She describes the

task of doing this as ‘absolutely soul destroying’ where she was seen by others as ‘the person that makes everybody redundant’. By contrast, she enjoys her work at HouseCo and states that she has a ‘great team’ of direct reports, where the ‘people are nice’ though she sometimes finds the politics frustrating. She joined HouseCo because their organisational values appealed to her.

Sophie

Sophie is a senior HR projects manager, a role she has held for the last three of 13 years at a local council, where she works as part of a large HR team and reports directly to the HR director. She has 23 years’ HR experience and previously worked in the private sector. She started her HR career in a small software company, working as a personal assistant for the chairman where she started doing some HR ‘by, you know, accident’ working with the company’s employment lawyers and later worked for a large marketing/advertising agency where she completed her CIPD qualification.

On joining the council her work involved much ‘hand-holding’ of line managers in an HR advisory capacity. As budget cuts have taken hold, she has been heavily involved in a project to outsource HR work and now manages the contract and relationship with an outsourced provider. Sophie also explains she is heavily involved in the ‘big project’; a cultural change project across the organisation. She describes the shift from the private to public sector as ‘big’ and her first time working in a large HR team. She says she enjoys having the support of other HR colleagues where it is ‘nice to not feel so challenged about things’ whereas in the private sector she says people think HR ‘made us do things or make life difficult’. Though she states public sector employees tend to over-rely on HR and struggle to make their own decisions, she feels more valued in her present role than working in HR in the private sector. She explains she has gained a ‘breadth of knowledge’ from working in local government and that the ‘political environment’ is something she has to ‘be wary of and manage’.

Appendix 6

Photograph catalogue summary

Participant 1 - Elaine

	Object/Image	Surface-level meaning
1	Flipchart with drawing on it from cross-functional resilience training activity	Having fun at work, team work
2	Computer and desk	The digital organisation, hot desking, (negative side) = physical pain and (positive side) = being able to work anywhere, flexibly, enabled by the technology.
3	Meeting room (chair and table)	Boredom, not being able/being able to talk to managers on an interview panel when waiting for candidates
4	A boiling kettle	Feeling angry about employees who 'take the mick' and those in HR who do not change with the organisation
5	Flowering plant	Supporting and nurturing colleagues, caring for others wellbeing
6	Holding hands	Being caring and supportive/compassion, hand-hold people through situations to support them.
7	Friends having a team huddle whilst playing rounders	Working well together as a team in HR
8	Building a tent with her friends	Building relationships and developing herself at work as an HR practitioner, not being seen as a graduate trainee by others, and feeling trusted by others to give advice. Feeling nice and proud.

Participant 2 – Anna

	Object/Image	Surface-level meaning
1	CIPD qualification certificates	Frustration with the need to be professionally qualified when she already holds a master's degree
2	Three A4 sheets of paper about	Feeling overwhelmed by the 'constant

	different employment legislation	tension with stuff like legal'
3	Rubbish bin with paperwork in it	Frustration when others do not listen to your advice, work you have done for them, 'feeling like you do work for no purpose'
4	Box of tissues	Having to deal with others' emotions and be empathetic but others thinking you have no emotions 'sometimes you just feel like you need a tissue'
5	In-trays	The level of work to be done and never getting 'to the bottom of your list, feeling like you're on a hamster wheel'
6	Two wooden figures with building blocks *	Problem-solving and helping employees make things better
7	Pile of question marks *	Being asked lots of questions and your advice being taken in a good or bad way. Being a messenger and blamed for the message you give others
8	Drawing of a diagram saying 'head, heart, feet and guts'	Summarises how it feels to be an HR practitioner, having to be both rational and emotional, having to be unpopular at times and 'you're expected to be everything'
9	Drawing of an island	'Feeling like Switzerland' – having to be neutral, keep things confidential, but also feeling isolated with no friends
10	Drawing of her face with her mouth open and hair on end	'A million reasons why I could be like that'. No emotions labelled but sounds made indicating frustration

Participant 3 – Alan

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Cup of tea	Comfort, needing to take time out
2	View from office window	Reflecting on working in a hospice and the purpose of the organisation – 'it just kind of makes you think where you are'
3	Fire extinguishers safety poster	HR consists of rules, restrictions and procedures
4	Stress balls	Stress relief, coping mechanisms

5	Smiling selfie	Having moments where I feel ‘really good about it’ (my work)
6	Coffee and toast	Having flexibility in my role
7	German hat	Diversity, the desire to have a more diverse workforce

Participant 4 – Jack

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Drawing of stick people striking	The picket line, resistance to change
2	Office wall chart of project to-do lists	Being busy, keeping on top of his list
3	Drawing of stick people, one HR person smiling and five smaller face-less stick people with question marks above their heads	HR is happy to help, despite getting asked random questions from staff, that can be stressful
4	Drawing of HR person holding two other people apart from HR with aggressive expressions	Being the person in the middle, having to be balanced and resolve conflict
5	Awards on a windowsill	Doing the right thing, pride
6	Hand holding a corporate image saying ‘keeping it simple’	Using simple language when we communicate
7	Screenshot of policies on intranet	Experiencing boredom
8	Screenshot of his outlook calendar on laptop	Feeling good about being busy
9	Female members of staff on phone and on laptop	Different ways people communicate
10	Screenshot of a Facebook group chat	Staff blaming HR

Participant 5 – Sarah

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Smiling ‘selfie’	Happiness and job satisfaction

2	Sarah with head laid down on her desk on folded arms	Frustration with managers
3	A tinsel-framed photograph of her team with Sarah, all wearing Christmas jumpers	Pride in her team
4	Organisational competency wheel diagram	HR projects that 'make you feel like you're moving forward' – positive emotions
5	Organisational values diagram	HR projects that 'make you feel like you're moving forward' – positive emotions
6	Scales	'Sitting in the middle' – 'having to make difficult decisions for the business to survive'
7	Suited human figure holding two other people shaking hands on a bridge	Feeling conflicted 'sitting in the middle' of employees and managers
8	Power cell	'Good power being trapped'

Participant 6 – Ruth

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Staircase	Staff behaving like children, being put on the 'naughty step'
2	Diversion sign	The HR journey, getting 'diverted off track'
3	Unwrapped chocolate orange*	Feeling part of the whole organisational team
4	Football team*	Being part of a team where the team work is 'really good'
5	Scaffolding*	'Feeling like I'm sort of holding everyone up', supporting others
6	Medical team*	Dealing with mental health issues 'having to be a medic, which you're not'
7	Christopher Marley in chains*	Frustration with things that 'tie you up in knots' like employment legislation
8	People staring into mobile phones*	Working with a new online generation, the impact of IT and smartphones
9	Two men arm wrestling*	Frustration with a lack of work ethic from younger generation

10	People cheering*	Ensuring employees are happy and engaged is ‘at the bottom of everything I do’

Participant 7 – Natalie

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Paper with ‘negative’ written out three times in capital letters	‘My summary of HR’ work
2	Telephone with broken headset	Broken communication, feeling sad and demotivated
3	Screenshot of staff development intranet	Feeling positive about my own staff development
4	Food and drink on her desk	Boredom – ‘this is just me on a daily basis eating’
5	Training booklets	‘Loving to learn’ and making myself more employable
6	Screen shot of organisation’s redundancy policy	Switching the emotion off – ‘being a bit robotic’
7	‘Time to talk’ display in workplace for mental health awareness event	Enjoying taking the initiative
8	Three sets of hands pointing at an HR policy	Teamwork
9	Confidential waste mountain	Juggling a lot of paper and tasks and ‘fumbling through’
10	Box of tissues	Being empathetic to staff, having to laugh because if you don’t you will cry (HR staff)
11	Cartoon animation of a police car*	Having to enforce policies and do negative tasks which are ‘difficult to kind of fluff that up’
12	Rainbow over the yellow brick road and the Emerald City*	New starters development journey in her organisation – starting optimistically, but warning them to turn back
13	Coaches and guide dogs*	Guiding and coaching managers, rewarding work
14	Slogan – ‘I’m not feeling very worky today’*	Feeling unmotivated and unappreciated

Participant 8 – Janet

	Object/Image	Surface-level meaning
1	Three-quarter length shot of Janet smiling wearing hard hat and high-visibility jacket	Feeling happy about making a difference
2	Buddha figure	Personal resilience
3	Factory floor	Importance of process and order
4	HR office	Feeling restricted 'my mini prison for four days'
5	Telephone	Feeling restricted – 'very desk focused' work
6	Skype screen	Feeling restricted – 'very desk focused' work
7	Friends on holiday on a boat	Being in control of her life
8	View onto the office car park and the hillside	Wanting to be out of the office taking a walk – having work life balance
9	Notebook and cup of tea on her desk	Teamwork 'having a brew' with HR co-worker 'when things are getting a bit ... '
10	Cat	Experiencing life 'on my terms'

Participant 9 – Catherine

	Object/Image	Surface-level meaning
1	Dog walking friends in the snow	Having to do unpleasant work that needs to be done – 'the dog still needs walking, it doesn't matter whether it's snowing outside […] whether you like it or not because you know it's the right thing for the dog'
2	Advertising image of a model wearing a T-shirt with a voodoo doll image on and slogan 'thinking of you'*	Being an easy target for staff as 'I'm "corporate" not from their site'. Perceived by staff to not have any feelings.
3	Home office with cats and dogs	Happiness – 'this is my happy place' where pets do not 'give you any gip'
4	Guardian angel figurine	Not discussed (conflated with photograph three)

5	‘Time to talk’ poster in a lift	HR staff having to remember to ‘care for ourselves’, not having friends out of HR
6	Factory floor	Loving being out on the shop floor talking to people
7	Wall in her office with cartoon drawings of staff who have won an internal award for their achievements	The ‘nice part of the job’ – feeling proud of others’ achievements and her own
8	Slogan ‘have you hugged a human resources employee today?’*	Using ‘humour to deflect’ that no-one makes her welcome when she arrives on site
9	Human resources meme with different quadrants of ‘what people think I do’*	Summary of what people who are not in HR think she does – others’ perceptions of HR work
10	Slogan – ‘you can’t fix crazy, all you can do is document it’ with female suited cartoon figure leaping in the air holding a notebook*	Making sure managers ‘manage with a human touch’
11	Her office when on site	Loneliness ‘it can be a bit of a lonely existence’
12	Staff breakout area	Feeling ‘passionate’ about people engagement, and the ‘calmer, quieter’ contrast of the corporate office to the ‘noisy, dirty’ shop floor.

Participant 10 – Lorraine

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Cropped photograph of Lorraine (work mates cropped) arm in arm with work mates, smiling and wearing a t-shirt with the slogan D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F	‘Our little rebellion’ – bonding with HR work mates through a difficult experience
2	Wedding photograph with her father	Having an emotional connection to work, ‘the link between home and work is intrinsic’
3	Emoji – of a swearing face*	‘I have to learn to keep my mouth shut’ – feeling frustrated with organisational politics

4	Notebook and pen – with words ‘Lorraine’s list of people she wants to punch in the face’ written on front*	Frustration, letting off steam with HR colleagues, a ‘little jokey thing’
5	Two hands holding a sign saying ‘it’s all about relationships’*	HR work is about great relationships but challenging people appropriately ‘not being their mate’
6	A bed with a hand-made quilt	Feeling like ‘I don’t create anything’
7	Bunch of keys	The key to helping people and ‘getting a buzz’ out of helping and supporting others
8	Cartoon with slogan ‘I don’t want to undervalue you, I want to underpay you’*	Disappointment, not feeling ‘important enough’
9	Coaching manual front cover	Enjoying coaching other people
10	Screenshot of the qualifications section of her CV	Enjoying learning and continuous professional development
11	Whiteboard with diagram with ‘pensions stuff’ on	Continuing to learn ‘how it works here’
12	Jigsaw of turtles/under the sea	Tenacity – going through difficult times
13	Framed photograph of a crocodile drawing	‘Lots of times in your life when you’re not liked’
14	Her office (empty)	Change, feeling sad but excited

Participant 11 – Sophie

	Object/Image	**Surface-level meaning**
1	Peppa pig cartoon – ‘piggy in the middle’*	Feeling like ‘piggy in the middle’ or managers and employees and having to be ‘thick skinned’ in HR
2	Tall office building	Experiencing highs and lows – going from feeling ‘buoyed to deflated’
3	Upwards direction arrow on a lamp post	Experiencing highs and lows – going from feeling ‘buoyed to deflated’
4	Lift	Up and down emotions
5	Kerb	Being able to adapt to change – feeling frustrated

6	Direction arrow on a roundabout	Being able to adapt to change – feeling frustrated
7	Woman banging her head against a wall*	Frustrated with 'political interference' and others' decision-making
8	Two figures shaking hands and two shadows above them fighting*	Confrontation with managers and trade unions
9	Empty bench	Feeling lonely in HR work – 'it can be a lonely place, the higher up you get'
10	Office shot of computers on desks with one staff member working	How technology is changing HR work
11	Screen shot of HR 'managing people' workshop	Collaborative working, being here to support managers – rewarding work
12	Cartoon of thumb up, at smiling cartoon figure in shirt and tie*	Collaborative working, being here to support managers – rewarding work

(*) – Internet downloaded images

Total - 115 photographs